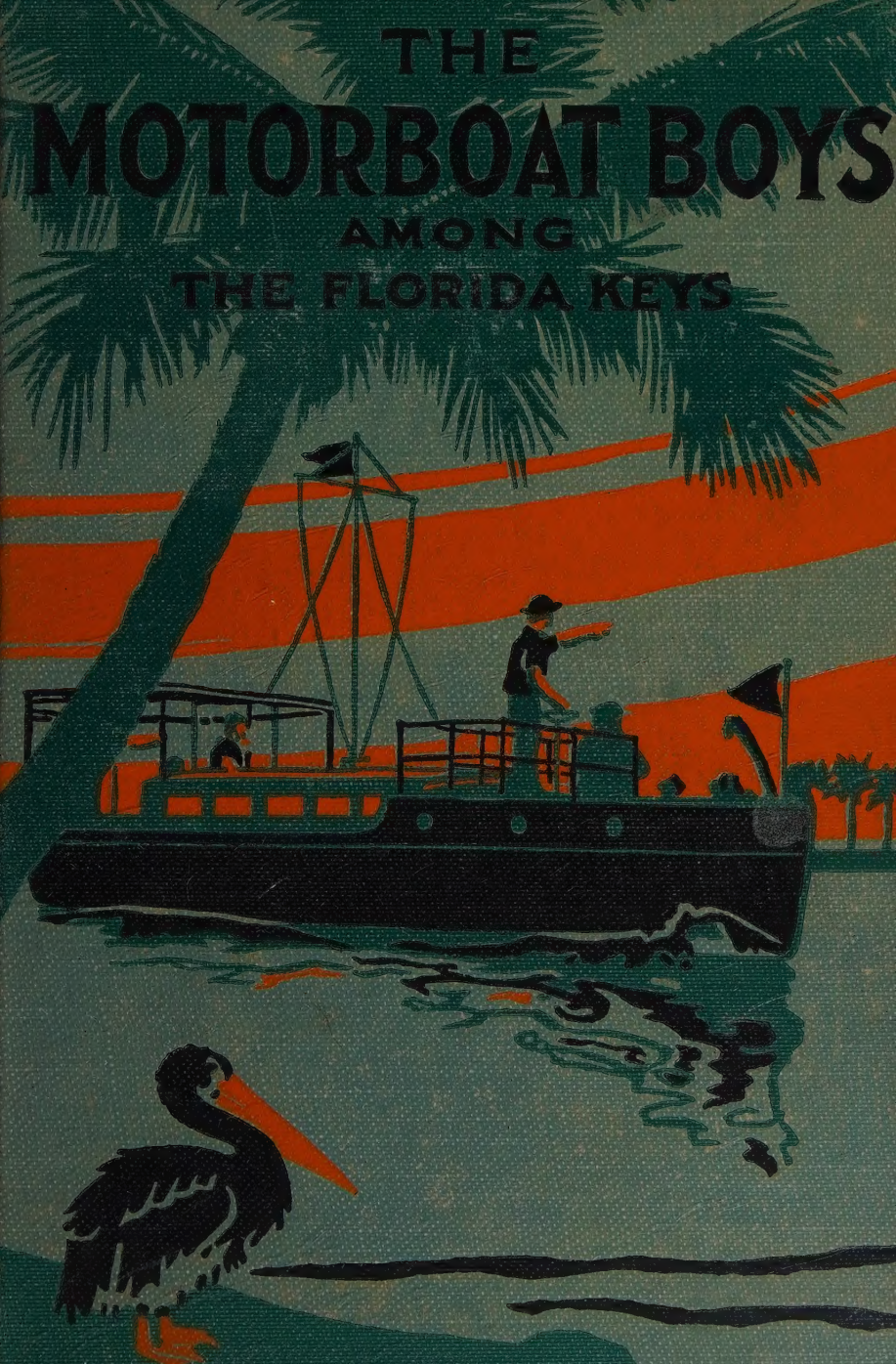
THE MOTORBOAT BOYS AMONG THE FLORIDA KEYS



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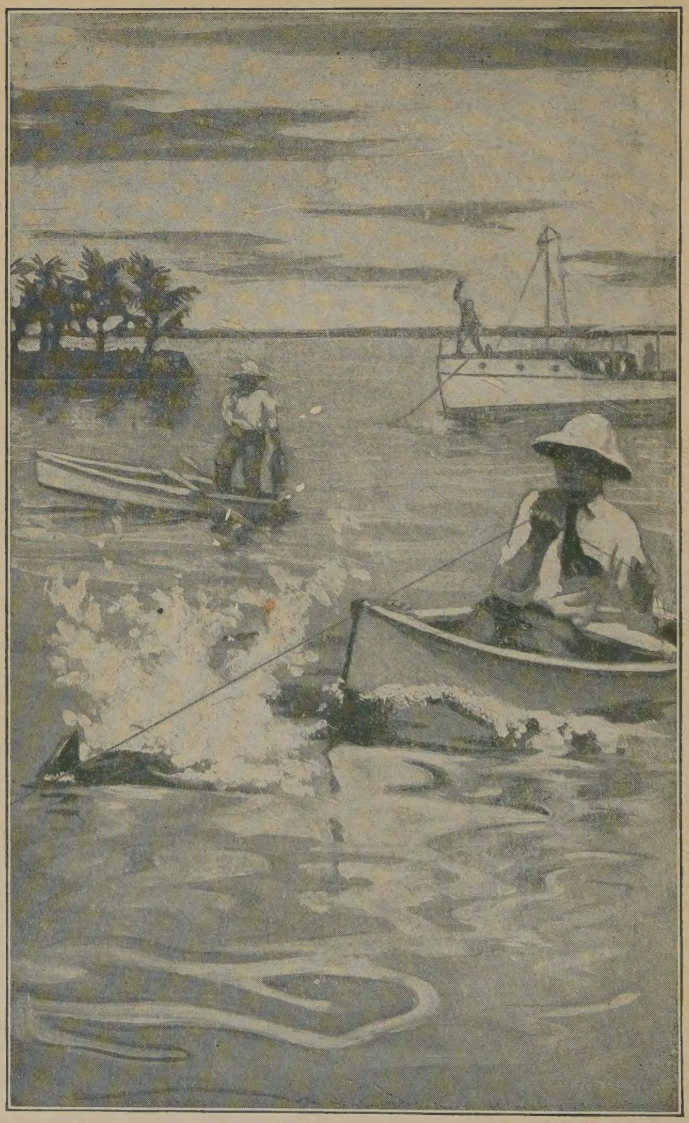

"He's got something, for a fact!" exclaimed Herb. [p. 14]

Motor Boat Boys

Among the Florida Keys

Or

The Struggle for the Leadership

By

LOUIS ARUNDEL

Author of "Motor Boat Boys on the St. Lawrence," "Motor Boat Boys' Cruise Down the Mississippi," Motor Boat Boys on the Great Lakes," "Motor Boat Boys Down the Coast."

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THE MOTOR BOAT BOYS AMONG THE FLORIDA KEYS

or

A Struggle For the Leadership

CHAPTER I.

AT ANCHOR, INSIDE THE BAR.

"Get busy here, Nick; now's your chance to make a big score for a starter!"

"It's awful kind of you, George, to let me out of my part of the work this afternoon, and that's a fact. I appreciate it, too; because I just want to beat Jimmy out in this thing the worst kind."

"Oh! shucks! don't mention it, Nick. We're all interested in your game, and you know it. Besides, there goes your rival, Jimmy, right now, in his little dinky boat, and with a wide grin on his face. Jack's given him a holiday, to celebrate the opening of the great fishing contest. Get a move on, you slow-poke!"

"Gee! then he'll get a start on me. I *must* hurry. Now, where in the dickens is that other oar, George? Oh! here she is, tucked away under the thwart. And can you tell me what

I did with that mullet the cracker gentleman gave me, to use for bait? Please help me get started, George. Seems like everything wants to go wrong at once!"

"Here you are, Nick. Got your tackle all right, have you; and sure that life preserver is in the boat? All ready? Then away you go; but keep clear of the inlet, if the tide changes, or you might get carried out to sea in that eight-foot dinky."

Three minutes later, and Nick Longfellow —who belied his name dreadfully, in that he was short, and fat, and built pretty much after the style of a full meal bag—was rowing clumsily toward a likely spot, where he believed he might do some successful fishing.

A trio of motor boats were anchored just inside Mosquito Inlet, not far from the town of New Smyrna on the east coast of Florida, having come in that very afternoon, after making the outside passage from the mouth of the St. Johns River.

They might have entered at St. Augustine, and taken the inside passage down to this place, only that something was wrong with the connecting canal that led to the Halifax River, and it seemed unwise to take the chances of being held up.

The boat from which Nick had put out on

his fishing excursion was a slender looking craft, and evidently capable of making high speed; but from the way she rolled whenever any one aboard moved, it could be seen that she must prove rather an uncomfortable home on which to spend very much time. The name painted in letters of gold on her bow was *Wireless;* and her skipper, George Rollins, took more or less pride in her accomplishments; although, truth to tell, he spent much of his time tinkering with her high-power engine, that had a way of betraying his trust when conditions made it most exasperating.

The boat from which the said Jimmy had started was called the *Tramp.* Her lines were not so fine as those of the hurry boat; but, nevertheless, an experienced cruiser would have picked her out as an ideal craft for combined business and pleasure. Her skipper was Jack Stormways, really the commodore of the little fleet; and his crew consisted of Jimmy Brannigan, a boy who sported many freckles, a happy-go-lucky disposition, and a little of the Irish brogue whenever he happened to remember his descent from the old kings of Erin.

As to the third motor boat, it was a broad beamed affair, that really looked like a pumpkin seed on a large scale; or, as some of the boys often called it, a "tub." It was well

named the *Comfort,* and its owner, Herbert Dickson, content to take things easy and let others do the hustling, never denied the claim George was fond of making, that he could draw circles around the "Ark" with his fast one. The engine of the *Comfort* had never failed to do its level best, which was limited to some nine miles an hour.

Herb also had an assistant, a tall, lanky lad, by name Josh Purdue. By rights he and Nick should have exchanged places; but Josh had had one experience on the dizzy speed boat, and absolutely refused to try it again.

These lads belonged in a town far up toward the sources of the mighty Mississippi River. They would have been attending high school, only that a fire had almost demolished the buildings, and vacation season was enforced until after New Year's.

Owning these boats, and having had considerable experience in making long trips, the boys had, with the consent of their parents, shipped the craft east to Philadelphia, and some five weeks previously started down the coast by the inside route.

And now they were starting on the second half of the remarkable voyage, which they intended would take them around the end of the peninsula of Florida, among the keys that

make this region the small boat cruiser's paradise, and finally land them at New Orleans in time to ship their boats north by steamboat.

Spending several days in Jacksonville, and taking aboard supplies, before making a start, Nick and Jimmy had fallen into quite a heated dispute as to which of them could be called the more expert fisherman.

Now, truth to tell, neither of the boys had had very much experience in this line; but, egged on by Josh and Herb, they had finally entered upon a contest which was to last until they reached New Orleans. Jack had solemnly entered the conditions in his log book; and the one who, during the duration of the cruise, could catch and land unassisted the heaviest fish of any description, was to be declared the champion.

Eager to accomplish wonderful "stunts," the two boys naturally seized upon this very first chance to get their lines overboard, in the hope of starting things moving by a weighty capture.

And the others, anticipating more or less fun out of the bitter rivalry, lost no opportunity to "sic" the contestants on. Just as a breeze fans a flame, so their frequent allusions as to the budding qualities of the rivals as

fishermen kept Nick and Jimmy eager for the fray.

As might have been expected, when George secured a tender for his speed boat, while in Jacksonville, as they were told they would need such things right along, in order to make landings where the water was too shoal for the larger craft to get close to the shore, he selected a dumpy little flat-bottomed "dinky," just about on a par with the *Wireless* when it came to eccentric qualities.

An expert with the oars or a paddle might manage the affair fairly well; but as Nick was as clumsy as he was fat, it seemed as though he would never get the hang of the squatty tender.

When he sat in the middle, one dip of an oar would cause the boat to spin wildly around as if on a pivot; and as to rowing in a straight course, the thing was utterly beyond Nick's abilities. So, when he was aiming for a certain spot, he was wont to approach his intended goal by a series of eccentric angles.

The flood tide was still coming in lazily, for they had managed to hit the inlet when the bar was well covered, wishing to take no chances. So Nick, after managing to propel the "punkin seed" over to the spot near a

bunch of mangroves, that he had selected as most promising, set to work.

He tied the boat, first of all, by a piece of cord, so that it would not float away while he fished. Then he laboriously got his tackle in readiness.

Those on the motor boats had kept an eye on the actions of the two rivals, as if anticipating that sooner or later they might have something to laugh over; for Nick was forever tumbling into difficulties of some sort.

"I don't believe Nick will ever get the hang of that dinky, George," remarked Jack, as he leaned over the side of the *Tramp,* peeling some potatoes which they intended having for supper; and, as there did not seem to be any decent chance to cook this ashore, the voyagers would have to do as they had often done before, use their little kerosene gas stoves aboard the several boats.

"It takes an expert to run that cut-off runt properly," said Herb, who was also engaged, wiping his engine, while Josh started operations looking to the evening meal, the lanky boy being by all odds the best cook in the party.

"Thank you for the compliment, Herb," laughed George. "It happens that I've always been at home in small boats. And there was something about that stumpy little affair

that made me take a fancy to her. Nick will do better after he learns the ropes. And he generally manages to get there, even if he does cover twice as much distance as I might. Look at Jimmy, fellows!"

"He's got something, for a fact!" exclaimed Herb; "and Nick is excited over it. See him wiggle around to watch, just as if he feared the game was going to be settled right in the start. Hi! sit down, Nick! Want to upset that cranky thing, do you? Well, it's good you've got your air bag fastened on; for without a life preserver you'd drown in this tideway, if ever you fell over."

"Watch Jimmy, will you, boys?" chuckled Jack. "Look at the grin on his face as he pulls his line in. You can see that half his fun is in keeping an eye on Nick, to enjoy his confusion and disappointment."

"Wow! why, the fish is pulling his boat around, do you notice?" demanded George.

"That looks as if it might be a good one. There, I thought Jimmy couldn't keep still much longer. Listen to him yap, would you?" Herb called out.

Jimmy had started to crow over his rival, as any ordinary boy would be apt to do under similar conditions.

"Don't be after gettin' downhearted too

soon, Nick, me bhoy!" he shouted. "Sure, this is only a little one for a stharter, so it is. Wait till I get going, and I'll open your eyes good and sthrong. Och! how he pulls! If only ye were a bit closer now, I'd let ye fale of the line, to know the sensation. Come in, ye darlint, and let's have a look at ye. Whirra! but he's bigger than I thought; and it's me as hopes he won't upset the boat when I pull him over the side!"

Of course much of this talk was for the purpose of making his rival squirm with envy; though the captive did show signs of being a strong fighter.

After about five minutes of apparently strenuous effort, Jimmy concluded that it would be unwise to risk losing his prisoner by playing it longer; so he dragged the hooked fish over the side. There was a flash of bronze and white that told Jack the story.

"A channel bass, and something like fifteen pounds in weight, too. We're sure of fish on this trip, anyway, with the two of them bending every energy to the winning of the medal!" he exclaimed.

"There goes Nick back to his work," said George. "If there are fish here, he hopes to get his share. But ten to one he's nearly choking with envy right now, because Jimmy drew

the first blood. It's an uphill game for poor old Nick."

"Well," Herb went on to remark, "the game will last a whole month, and more; so nobody can tell how the finish may turn out. Nick might get hold of a bigger fish any minute. But it's up to us to encourage 'em right along. We'll never want for a fish diet if we do, for they'll stay up nights to keep at it."

"There, I declare, if Nick didn't have a jerk at his line then; but he failed to hook the rascal!" Jack exclaimed.

"And came near upsetting the boat in his excitement, too," complained George. "If he does, I can see the finish of my oars, which will go out of the inlet with the ebb tide."

"But what about Nick; you don't seem to worry about how he'll act?" laughed Herb.

"Oh! he'll just float around, with that life preserver holding him up, till one of us pushes out and tows him ashore. Whatever is he doing now, do you suppose?" George demanded.

"Throwing out that shark hook of his, with the clothes line attached," Jack explained. "You see, Nick has evidently made up his mind to go in for something worth while. He wants to knock the spots out of Jimmy's hopes right in the start."

"But, my stars! if he hooks a big shark while he's sitting in that punkin seed of a boat, there's bound to be a warm old circus!" Herb declared.

Some little time passed, and those aboard the anchored motor boats, busily engaged in their various occupations, had almost forgotten about the bitter rivalry going on so near by, when suddenly they were startled by a great shout.

"It's Nick, this time!" exclaimed Jack, as he jumped to the side of the *Tramp* to observe what was taking place.

"And say, he's fast to a whopper, as sure as you live!" cried Herb.

George added his contribution on the heels of the rest.

"That string's broke away, just as I expected, and there goes Nick and the punkin seed, full tilt for the inlet! By all that's out, fellows, he must have caught a whale that time, fresh run from the sea. Hi! hold on there, Nick, that's my boat!"

CHAPTER II.

THE WARNING RATTLE.

Jack Stormways was a quick-witted lad. He had proved this fact on numerous occasions in the past, within the memory of his chums.

When anything sudden happened, while others might appear to be spellbound, and waste precious seconds in staring, Jack was very apt to be on the jump, and *doing.*

So in the present instance, while it might appear more or less comical, seeing the fat boy crouched in that silly little boat belonging to the *Wireless,* and being dragged through the water at a most rapid rate by the shark he had hooked, there was always an element of danger connected with the affair.

And so Jack, after taking that one look out over the water, sprang forward, and started dragging his anchor aboard with all possible speed. That done, he next applied himself to getting power on the boat, which fortunately could be done with a simple turning over of the engine.

"Hello! are you going to chase the runaway with the *Tramp?*" cried Herb, who was in the act of climbing over the side into his tender,

as though meaning to put out in pursuit himself.

"Yes; jump aboard here, Herb; I might need help!" came the answer; and, accustomed to respecting Jack's judgment, the one addressed managed to clamber over the side of the *Tramp* just as that craft started off.

Meanwhile Nick was going at a great rate, not in a direct line for the inlet, but following jerky, eccentric angles, as though the shark hardly knew what to do, on feeling the contact with the point of the big hook at the end of the chain.

Several times the fat boy seemed on the point of creeping forward to get at the rope that was fastened to a cleat in the bow of the dinky. It was George who roared at him on such occasions.

"Keep still, Nick; sit down, can't you? You'll upset sure, if you don't lie flat! Jack's coming out after you on the jump! Hey, look out there, Jimmy, or you'll get foul, too! Whew! what a race horse you've got fast to, Nick. If only you could land him, Jimmy's name would be Mud. There he goes again, heading for the bar! Look at the water shooting up on either side of that dandy little boat, would you? And ain't Nick having the ride of his life, though? There he goes, crawling

along up to the bow again. Perhaps he wants to cut loose; small blame to him if he does!"

Everybody was either laughing, or shouting advice to Nick, while this exciting little drama was taking place.

Indeed, Nick himself seemed to be the only one who was not getting some measure of fun out of the affair. His usually red face looked pale, as he managed to reach the squatty bow of the little boat. But when he found that it was dragged down by the action of the fish, as well as his own weight, he drew back again in alarm, for water had come rushing aboard.

Once the motor boat got started, of course it speedily came up with the runaway. Jack had given the wheel into the charge of Herb, who was fully competent to run things. This allowed the other an opportunity to do anything that offered, looking to the rescue of poor frightened Nick.

"Get me out of this, won't you, Jack? I don't like it one little bit," pleaded the fat boy; and then, as some new freak on the part of the shark caused the dinky to lunge sideways in a fearful manner, he shouted in new alarm: "Quit it, you ugly beast! Who wants to nab you now? I pass, I tell you! Let go, and get out of this! Wow! look at him splash the water, Jack, would you?"

"He wanted to take a look at you, that's all," Jack called out. "Don't you think you'd better cut loose, and let your hook go, Nick?"

"I ain't got any knife; it went overboard the first thing. Besides," added the occupant of the dinky, who was now once more crouching in the stern, "if I go up there, the water just pours in. I'm sitting in it right now. Jack, can't you think of some way to make him leave me alone?"

"Perhaps I might," came the reply, as the skipper of the *Tramp* dodged back into the hunting cabin of his boat.

He almost immediately reappeared again, holding a rope in his hands. This he made fast to a cleat at the bow; and then, turning to Herb, asked him to bring the motor boat as close to the fleeing dinky as possible.

Leaning down, Jack managed to get a peculiar sort of hitch around the taut line; and a quick jerk seemed to secure his own rope, so that it would not slip. His next action was to take a keen knife, and lay its edge upon the line, close to the spot where it was fastened to the wobbling dinky.

Of course it instantly parted.

"Oh! that's too bad! Now I've lost my tackle!" cried Nick; although he looked vastly

relieved at finding that he was no longer fast to the queer sea horse.

Jack paid no further attention to the rescued chum. The fight was now to be all between himself and the shark.

Quickly the line paid out, until there came a heavy jerk, and then once more it became taut.

"Bully! it's holding fine, Jack!" shouted Herb, who had watched to see the result; for he doubted whether the connection, brought about under such difficulties, would be maintained.

"Now, gradually bring the boat to a full stop," said Jack, as he again reached back into the cabin, and drew out a rifle. "As soon as you've got him halted, begin to back up. That will drag him to the top, you understand; and I'll have a chance to pot the rascal."

"That's right," declared Herb, who could grasp a thing readily enough, even if slow to originate clever schemes himself.

Just as Jack had said, when the pull was being exerted in the other direction, the struggling monster was presently seen splashing at a tremendous rate, though unable to resist the drawing powers of the ten-horsepower engine.

Jack, crouching there, with one elbow resting on his knee, took as good an aim as the

conditions allowed. Then came the sharp report of the gun.

"Whoop! you hit him all right, that time, Jack!" shouted Herb; as there ensued a tremendous floundering at the end of the rope. "But he ain't knocked out yet. Give him another dose of the same sort!"

Across the water came the cries of the others who were watching this exciting scene. And loudest of all could be heard the voice of Nick, now once more in possession of his nerve.

"Give it to him, Jack! Pound the measly old pirate good and hard! He won't try that game again in a hurry, I tell you! Hey! Jimmy, you ain't in it this time, with that little minnow of yours. Hurrah! that's the time you poked him in the slats, Jack! Trust you for knowing how! I guess he's a sure goner after that meal of cold lead."

Jack had fired a second time; and, just as the wildly excited Nick said, he seemed to have met with better success than on the former occasion. The trapped sea monster threshed the water still, but not in the same violent manner as before; and his fury seemed to be rapidly diminishing as the result of his wounds began to be felt.

"Now, stop her, Herb, and start ahead

slowly!" Jack called out, hovering over the spot where the line was fast to the cleat.

The boy at the wheel did as he was directed; and as the line became slack Jack took it in, ready to hastily secure the same about another cleat in case the dying shark developed a disposition to make a last mad dash.

But evidently the big fish was "all in," and when they reached a point nearly over where he lay, there were seen only a few spasmodic movements to his body.

"Let's drag him near the other boats, so we can pull the old fellow up on that little beach," Jack suggested.

Ten minutes later, and the six boys were all ashore, laying hold of the rope in order to drag the captured fish out.

"Say, he's some whopper, let me tell you!" exclaimed George, as, having drawn the shark high and dry, they all hastened to examine the capture.

Nick was dancing with joy, and his eyes fairly beamed as he stood beside the great bulk, putting one foot up on it after the manner in which he had seen noted hunters do, in pictures that told of their exploits when hunting big game.

"Now, how about it, Jimmy?" he demanded, as Jack was cutting the stout hook from the

jaw of the monster. "Think this is some punkins, don't you, now. Three hundred pounds, if it weighs an ounce. Have to hustle some, let me tell you, my boy, if you ever expect to go a notch higher than this."

"Arrah, come off, would you!" indignantly cried Jimmy. "Sure, ye wouldn't be claiming that ye took this same ould sea wolf, and inter it in the competition. I do be laving it to Jack here, if that's fair?"

"But I hooked it, you all saw that?" expostulated Nick.

"I don't know," remarked Herb, looking very serious; "I was under the impression that the shark had got you, up to the time Jack came along with his little gun, and tapped him on the head. How about it, Commodore? Can Nick enter any claim to having caught this prize?"

"Wait," said Jack, smiling; "let me read out the exact words of the wager. I've got a copy right here in my note book. Listen now, both of you. It reads like this: 'Each contestant shall have the liberty of fishing as often as he pleases, and the fish may be taken in any sort of manner; the one stipulation being that the capture shall be undertaken by the contestant, *alone and unaided;* and that he must have possession of the fish long enough

to show the same, and have its weight either estimated or proven.' "

"That settles your goose, me bhoy!" croaked Jimmy, gleefully; "and I'm top notch in the game up to the prisent moment. Do we get busy again, Nick, I say; or are ye satisfied to lit me claim first blood?"

"Well, it seems mighty small, that after grabbing that nice fellow, I've got to let the honors go for the day," remarked the fat boy. "And I guess I've had quite enough excitement for once. I'm all soaked in the bargain; and it feels kind of cool, you see. So I won't fish any more right now. But next time, just you look out for yourself, Jimmy. I'm after you like hot cakes. Say, ain't we going to have that fish for supper, boys?"

Nick was a voracious eater. He liked nothing in the world so much as to enjoy a glorious meal; and long after his chums were through, he often sat there, finishing the dishes. On the other hand, lean, lanky Josh, while possessed of a knack for cooking all sorts of good things, had a poor appetite, and often merely nibbled at his food, to the wonderment and disgust of the fat boy.

"If you get to work and clean it," said Jack, "I think there ought to be plenty to go around. But you'll find that one-third of a channel bass

is the head. As we had one before, we know it's worth eating, so pitch in, Nick. Since you lost your knife overboard, take mine here, and get busy."

It pleased Jimmy to strut around near where his rival was occupied with his menial task, and make occasional remarks about "his prize," calculated to rub salt in Nick's wounds. But after all, the fat boy was good-natured, and took things in a matter-of-fact way. Besides, he was grimly resolved that sooner or later, by hook or by crook, even if it were a fish-hook, he would overcome this strong lead of his rival in the race for high honors.

As more or less fuel had been found ashore, and Josh expressed his desire to manage the supper, as head chef, it was found advisable to change their plans. And so, assisted by many willing workers, the lanky wonder started operations.

He was soon bustling around, looking very consequential. Nick had made him a *chef's* cap out of a piece of white muslin, which he was requested to wear on all such occasions as this, when in charge of affairs about the cooking fire.

Nick himself was busy trying to mend some little contraption, purchased on the street in Jacksonville, and which he had broken before

he could have any fun with the same as originally intended.

Jack, stepping off from the *Tramp,* where he had gone to get some of the tinware needed for coffee and substantial food, was electrified to hear Josh give a whoop; and at the same instant his ears were assailed by a dreadful rattling noise that sounded for all the world like the angry buzz of a diamond-back rattlesnake.

"Thunder and Mars! Great Jerusalem! I'm struck in the leg!" bellowed the lengthy Josh, as he came tumbling back from the edge of the bushes, grabbing at his shin in a frantic manner.

CHAPTER III.

DOWN THE INDIAN RIVER.

"Now, what d'ye know about that?" exclaimed Nick, scrambling to his feet after his usual clumsy way; for when the fat boy happened to become excited he generally "fell all over himself," as Josh put it.

"What ails you, Josh?" demanded Herb.

No sooner had the lengthy one reached a spot near the fire than he threw himself down, and commenced frantically to pull up the left leg of his trousers.

"Gosh! looky there, will you, fellers?" he bellowed, as if in a panic. "He sure got me that time; I guess I'm a goner. Won't one of you get down and suck the poison out for me? You know, I'd do it in your case. Oh! please hurry up. My leg's beginning to swell right now, and in a few minutes it'll be too late!"

"Poison!" echoed Herb, who seemed to be in utter ignorance of the entire matter, and could only stare at the little speck of blood showing on the white skin as if horribly fascinated.

"Yes, oh! didn't you hear the terrible buzz

he gave when he stuck his fangs in me?" groaned poor Josh.

Jack had thrown himself down alongside the wounded one, and was minutely examining the hurt. He looked up at this juncture, and to the astonishment of Herb and George, was apparently grinning.

"Brace up, Josh," he said, cheerfully; "you're not going to kick the bucket yet awhile, I reckon."

"Oh! how kind of you to tell me so, Jack; but how do you know? Please tell me why you say that," pleaded the cook, beginning to look relieved; for he had fallen long ago into placing the utmost confidence in whatever Jack believed.

"Well, in the first place, there's only one tiny puncture, you see; and if this was a snake bite there'd be the plain marks of *two* fangs," Jack announced.

"Sounds all right, Jack; but perhaps this critter only had one fang. Didn't you hear the angry shake of his old rattle-box when he struck? It gave me a cold chill, because, right at the same second, I felt something stick me. I'll never forget the awful sensation, even if I do live through it," and Josh rubbed his leg vigorously, as though hoping that by inducing

a circulation he might avert the threatened dire catastrophe.

"Well, if you only look around right now, perhaps you'll discover the source of that same buzz," Jack went on, soberly.

"Why, whatever can you mean?" Josh stammered, staring his amazement.

"Notice how Nick, for instance, is trying the best he knows how to keep his face straight, even while he's just shaking all over with the laugh that's in him. Stand up, Nick; and hold out that hand you've got behind your back."

Jack pointed rather sternly at the culprit while speaking.

"Oh, well, I s'pose I'll have to 'fess," mumbled the fat boy, as he whipped the hand in question around. so that all could see what he was holding.

"Why, it's that boozy little rattle he picked up in Jacksonville, and broke on the first trial!" exclaimed George. "He's been dabbling at it ever since, trying to mend the old thing."

"Yes," said Jack, "and just succeeded in getting it to working. Here, give it to me, Nick, and I'll show them how it whirrs when you turn it around rapidly."

Taking the little wooden contrivance, Jack

gave it a series of quick turns, with the result that a loud angry buzzing was produced, not unlike the warning rattle of an enraged snake.

"Oh! that was it, Jack!" cried the relieved Josh. "Thank you for showing me, too. It sure takes a big load off my mind, because you'll never know what a nasty feeling I had at the time. It was a mean dodge, Nick, and I can't forget it in a hurry, either. But Jack, that don't explain everything."

"Now you're thinking of that sudden little pain you had in the leg?" suggested the other, nodding his head understandingly.

"You bet I am!" Josh declared. "It took me at the identical second I heard that whirr. If it wasn't a snake bit me, what did, Jack?"

"Let's find out right away, so's to relieve your mind," Jack went on. "Lead the way to the very spot where you were when you heard the sound, and felt that sudden pain."

"That's dead easy," remarked the tall boy; and as he said this he scrambled to his feet, his trousers still rolled up to his knee, and limped across the camp.

Jack noticed, however, that he approached the place cautiously, as though not yet wholly convinced that there might not be a dreadful diamond-back rattler lying in ambush, waiting for another chance to puncture him.

"There it is, right in front of you, Jack!" Josh cried, pointing; "I happened to want a handful of dry timber to hurry up the fire, and stepped over here, because I'd noticed just the thing under this lone palmetto. Just as I banged into that little bunch of brush it happened."

Jack laughed.

"Look here, fellows, and you'll see what he ran against!" he announced, taking hold of the long, narrow, dark green leaf of a plant that was growing there.

"What is it?" asked George.

"A plant they call Spanish Bayonet," replied Jack, seriously now. "You see, like lots of semi-tropical plants, such as the yucca, century plant or Mexican aloe, and others, it's got a sharp point, almost like a needle. Well, just as luck would have it, Josh banged into one of these leaves at the very second Nick began to rattle his alarm box. No wonder he got a shock! It was enough to stagger the bravest."

"Then it was what you might call a coincidence?" suggested Herb.

"Huh! a mighty tough one, too," grunted Josh, as he rubbed his injured limb ere turning down his trouser leg.

"But see here, fellows, are we going to let our funny man try that stunt every little

while?" demanded George, frowning at his shipmate.

"I vote for one against such a thing," declared Herb. "That nasty little box has too suggestive a rattle to please me. If I was going through the saw palmetto scrub, and he happened to amuse himself with it, I just know I'd jump ten feet. It would make life miserable for me right along."

"Jimmy, what do you say?" demanded Jack.

"Me too!" piped up the Irish lad. "Sure it do be giving me the crapes just to listen to that thing go whirring around."

"You hear the verdict, Nick?" said Jack, pretending to assume the air of a judge addressing the prisoner in the dock.

"Oh! I ain't saying a word," Nick replied, with a shrug of his fat shoulders. "I c'n see myself that it would be a mean trick to play. Never thought much about it that way. Give her a toss, Jack. And Josh, I hope you won't hold it against me too hard. You know, you're top-notch yet in that bully contest of ours."

In this way did the contrite joker attempt to buy peace in the camp; and that he was fairly successful might be judged from the grin that slowly began to spread over the thin face of the cook.

"That's all right, Nick; so long as it don't

happen again I ain't goin' to think too much about it. Fact is, it's goin' to give me a cold shiver every time I hear anything like that rattle. And now I'll be getting back to my work."

"Then you don't want anybody to suck the poison out?" asked Nick.

"Let up on that, now, will you? I guess I'm able to hobble around yet," and bending down, Josh gathered some of the dry trash that he wanted, to hurry the fire on with.

Jack had tossed the little rattle-box contrivance into the fire, where it was soon entirely consumed.

Although they ate supper ashore, it was considered wise to sleep aboard. The only one who grumbled at this decision was poor Nick. He had a hard lot to follow, for the narrow speed boat offered but poor sleeping accommodations for two, and many a time the stout youth was wont to bemoan his sad fate as he rubbed his aching sides in the morning.

They left the camp at Mosquito Inlet an hour after sunrise on the following morning, and started down past New Smyrna, heading for the Haulover Canal that connects Mosquito Lagoon with the famous Indian River.

Under Jack's wise guidance they found little trouble in navigating the broad or nar-

row waters of the various channels. As steamboats passed through daily in the season, there were plenty of "targets" pointing out the deeper waters; and where the lagoon happened to be very shallow, canals had been dredged.

Taking it leisurely, they arrived at Titusville about two in the afternoon. Here one of the boys went for the mail, and also to pick up the few things they had on the list of "necessities wanted."

As the western shore of the river is pretty thickly settled now, it was decided to cross over, and skirt along Merritt's Island until near its foot, where they could probably find a spot free from civilization's touch; and this was what appealed to the motor boat boys at all times—wild solitude.

Long before evening overtook them they had come to a halt, and anchored the boats close to the eastern shore, just beyond a point that would protect them from any wild norther that might chance to spring up. All of them had heard so much about these dreaded storms that swoop down upon the pilgrims in small boats when navigating Florida waters that they were always on the watch for their coming.

"I say, Jack!" exclaimed George, as they landed in their small dinkies, intending to

again have a fire, and be congenial; "look out yonder on the river, and tell me if that ain't the same strange launch we saw twice before above."

"You're right, George, that's what," replied the other, as he whirled around, to shade his eyes with one hand in order to see the better; for the sun was just going down beyond the wide river, Rockledge way, and shone fiercely.

"If I had the glasses now, I'd like to see who they are," George went on. "Seems to me the parties on that boat act queer. They dodge out of sight whenever they think we're watching. I don't just like the way they act, Jack, do you?"

"Oh! I don't know," replied the other. "That may be only imagination with you, George. The only thing that strikes me as queer is that the boat seems to be as near a ringer for the *Tramp* as anything I ever struck."

"Wow! you're on the job now, when you say that, and funny I hadn't noticed it before, Jack," George declared. "Now that you mention it, I declare if it isn't just remarkable. I suppose all of our boats have doubles, somewhere in the country; for the makers have a model they follow out heaps of times in a sea-

son; but all the same, it strikes a fellow as queer to run across a duplicate of the boat he's kind of looked on as his own especial property."

"Well," grunted Nick, who had been near enough to overhear this talk, "I'm right sorry for somebody then, if there's a ringer for the *Wireless.* They have my sympathy, I tell you that right now."

But George only sniffed, and disdained to notice the slur cast upon his pet. It seemed that the more the others found fault with the actions of the *Wireless,* the greater became his attachment for the erratic boat.

"Well, they're ahead of us again, for one thing," he remarked. "It looks like a game of tag, right along; now we're leading, and then they forge ahead. I'm just going to keep tabs on that boat, for fun; and some fine day perhaps I'll have my curiosity satisfied. I'd give something to know who they are, and why they act like they do."

"Oh! they won't keep me awake much, I tell you that," said Nick, loftily. "When I bother my head it's going to be about something worth while—understand?"

"Sure" remarked George, quickly. "Something that threatens a calamity in the feeding line, for instance; a running short of supplies.

That's the subject Nick worries about most."

"Well, is there any more important business known than supplying the human engine with plenty of fuel?" demanded the other, sturdily. "Perhaps the engineer may be the more important fellow of the two; but the stoker is just as necessary, if the machine is to be kept him. I'm always Johhny-on-the-spot when it comes to helping Josh get grub ready"—going. But there's Josh calling me to help and he waddled off serenly; for Nick was so happily constituted that no matter what jabs he received from his chums, they seemed to roll from him like water from a duck's back.

"Hear the mullet jump?" remarked Jack, as they ate supper after night had set in. "D'ye know, fellows, this ought to be a good time to try that fish spear?—for we'll have an hour of dark before the old moon peeps up, and there isn't a breath of wind to ruffle the water. Jimmy, I appoint you to push me around a bit, and see what we can do, though I wouldn't count too much on any big score."

"I'm on, Jack, darlint," Jimmy immediately responded; "and it's ready I am now."

CHAPTER IV.

THAT SAME OLD UNLUCKY WIRELESS.

Moving about in the steadiest of the little tenders, with a flare in the bow, and Jimmy to gently push in the stern, Jack sought to strike some game fish. His success was not very flattering, though he certainly did enjoy the experience. It was really worth while to peer down into the shallow depths, and see what lay there.

Several times he caught glimpses of channel bass, sheepshead, or sea trout, which last is only another name for the weak fish of the North; but as a rule they flashed away before he could strike.

He did succeed in spearing one trout of about three pounds, much to Jimmy's delight. And later on, he struck a nasty creature with what seemed to be a barb on the top of his tail, which he thrust around in a savage manner as Jack held him up on the end of his pole.

"Look out, and don't get too close to him, Jimmy," Jack warned.

"Sure now and I won't," replied the other, "for, to till the truth, it's me as don't like the looks of that little fixin' on the ind of his tail."

"It must be what they call a stingaree or stingray," Jack went on. "I never saw one before, but I've read a lot about 'em. They say he can poison you, if ever he hits with that barb. You know what a mudcat can do, out on the Mississippi; well, this is the same thing, only a whole lot worse."

"Drop the squirmin' bog-trotter back into the wather, Jack, me bhoy; for 'tis us as don't want too close an acquaintance with him. He'd make it too warrm for us, by the same token," Jimmy declared; and Jack complied only too willingly.

"I guess we've had about enough of this, so let's go ashore," he suggested.

Nick awaited them, eager to ascertain the amount of their captures. He whiffed on discovering only one fish aboard the dinky.

"Huh! could eat that all by myself, and then not half try," he remarked.

"All right, then; if you do the needful to it, you're welcome, Nick," laughed the one who had captured the sea trout.

Of course, Nick became suddenly suspicious.

"You wouldn't play any trick on me, now, I hope, Jack, and get me to eat a fish that wasn't fit for the human stomach?" he questioned, uneasily.

"That's what they call a sea trout down

here; but up North it's the weakfish, and said to be as toothsome as almost anything that swims," Jack remarked.

"Oh! all right, then I accept your kind offer. I'll get busy right now, and have him ready for the morning. Wish you had got one apiece, I hate to seem greedy, you know, fellows," he went on to say, as if thinking he ought to excuse himself.

When the morning came Nick was astir before anybody else, for he had a duty on his mind. He bothered Josh so much that finally the cook made him start a blaze of his own, over which he could prepare his breakfast; and Nick managed pretty well, considering that he had never made a study of the art of cookery.

They started off at a booming pace. The run down Indian River that day would always remain a pleasant memory with the young cruisers. Fort Pierce was reached on schedule time, after passing through the Narrows, and securing a mess of oysters from a boat engaged in dredging there.

Again one of the voyagers went after mail and supplies. There was always something lacking, besides the necessary gasoline. Six growing boys can develop enormous appetites when living a life in the open, and upon salt

water. Besides, there was Nick, capable of downing any two of his chums when it came to devouring stuff. No wonder, then, that the question of supplies was always uppermost on their minds.

Once more they headed across to the eastern shore, where they would be more apt to find a quiet nook for the next night's camp. One more day's run, if all went well, would take them to Lake Worth; and after serious consultation it had been decided that they would, when the right chance came, put to sea through that inlet, to make the run south to Miami.

Once again had both Nick and Jimmy been seized with the fever of rivalry. During the day they had been busily engaged preparing set lines, which they expected to put out over night, in the hope of making a big haul.

Nick had bought a lot of material in Jacksonville. This in the main consisted of large hooks, with snells made of brass wire, which latter he manufactured himself, Jack having shown him how; and a large swivel at the end of the foot length. Then he had secured a large quantity of very strong cotton cord, made waterproof by some tarring process, after the manner of the rigging aboard sailing vessels.

One thing Jack had bought in Fort Pierce,

which they understood would be pretty much of a necessity during the many weeks they expected to spend among the keys that dotted the whole coast line of Florida.

This was called a cast-net, and was some eight feet in length, though when fully extended it would cover a circle twice that in diameter.

There were leads along the outer edges, and a series of drawing strings running up through a ring in the center.

"You see," said Jack, that evening, when they were ashore, "I watched a fellow use one up above, and even took a few lessons, so I've kind of got the hang on it."

"Then please show us?" asked Nick, eagerly.

"Listen to him, would you?" exclaimed Herb; "to hear him talk you'd think Nick had a sneaking idea he might some day haul in a big giant of a fish in this flimsy net."

"No, but it's good to get mullet for bait," the fat boy remonstrated; "and as I expect to do lots of fishing on this trip—and it may not always be convenient for Jack to haul the net—why, I thought I had ought to know the ropes."

"Good boy, Nick!" laughed Jack; "and I'll be only too glad to show every fellow all I

know, which isn't any too much. Now, here's the way you gather up the line, so as to let go suddenly. Then you hold the net like this."

"Sure do ye ate some of the leads?" questioned Jimmy, seeing Jack take several between his teeth.

"Oh! not any! but this is one of the times when a fellow wishes he had been born with three hands. As I haven't, I must hold these leads by my teeth. The next thing is to swing the whole net around this way, and let fly with a rotary motion, at the same time letting go with your teeth. That is a very important thing to remember, for you might stand to lose a few out of your jaw if you held on."

"Oh, I see!" remarked George; "and the net flings open as it whirls through the air, falling on the water that way?"

"Just so, with the leads taking the outer edge rapidly down. Then, by pulling at the line, which is tied, you see, to all these strings, the net is drawn shut like a big purse, enclosing anything that was under it when it struck the water."

One by one they made trials with the net, but all of them proved pretty clumsy. Jimmy was nearly dragged into the shallow water when he made his first attempt.

"Glory be!" he howled, as he put his hand

quickly to his mouth; "if I didn't have the teeth of a horse I do belave I'd have lost the whole set thin. But once bit, twict shy. Nixt toime I'll let go, rest easy on that. And I'm going to get the hang of that Spanish cast-net, if it takes ivery tooth in me head, so I am."

"And you'll do it, Jimmy, never fear," laughed Jack. "That do-or-die spirit is going to win the day. Here, Nick, try it again. You seem to have got the knack of it pretty well, only you want to throw harder, or the mullet will get away before the net falls on the water."

Finally the boys tired of the strenuous exertion, and as Josh announced supper ready, they turned their attention to more pleasant duties.

"This is something in which I can shine, anyhow," chuckled Nick, as he sat there, with a pannikin cram-full of various good things, and a cup of steaming coffee on the ground close beside him.

No one disputed the assertion; in fact, there was a general grin, and a series of nods around the circle, to prove that for once their opinions were unanimous.

Frolicsome 'coons seemed numerous at this camp on Hutchinson's Island. They at-

tempted to pillage, after the boys had settled down to sleep. Twice was the quiet of the camp disturbed by the rattle of tin pans, and upon investigation it was found that some prowling little animal had endeavored to devour the hominy Josh had cooked, intending to fry slices of the same for breakfast.

Nick made out to believe that it might have been a wildcat, or possibly a bear, until Jack showed him the plain tracks of long slender feet close to the receptacle of the hominy, and explained that only a raccoon could have made these.

When the morning came, an early start was made, for they had quite a little run down the river, through Jupiter Narrows, and then by means of the canal into Lake Worth.

Arriving at this latter place early in the afternoon, they spent some time looking about—although it was out of the season for the fashionable crowd that flock to Palm Beach during February and March.

Jack had studied his coast charts most carefully. He knew they would have a dangerous outside passage to Miami, that must consume some seven hours, because of the *Comfort's* slowness; and as they could not afford to take any chances, it became absolutely necessary that they wait until the weather gave positive

signs of remaining fairly decent during the day.

As this meant a combination of favoring breezes and calm waters, it was impossible to tell how long they might have to wait. It might mean one day, and then again they could be kept here at Lake Worth a week.

"You're wondering why I'm so particular, fellows," Jack had remarked, when they talked over the matter among themselves, "especially when we made a heap of outside runs coming down the coast. But this is really the worst of the bunch, and I reckon much more dangerous than any we've got ahead of us. For seventy miles here there isn't really a decent harbor where a small boat could put in to escape a sudden change in weather. And when things do go crooked down here they beat the band. The nearer you get to the tropics the harder the winds can howl when they want to show their teeth."

"That's all right, Jack," remarked Herb; "we depend on you to use good judgment in all such matters. And you can see how much we rely on what you decide, when we're ready to follow you like sheep do the belwether."

"I wonder, now," remarked George, "if that bally little boat that's a ringer for the *Tramp* has gone further south?"

"What makes you ask that?" Jack inquired.

"Well, ever since she passed us that evening across from Rockledge I haven't seen hide nor hair of the mystery. So somehow I reckon she must either be further down the lake, or else gone to Miami by the outside route, like we intend to do."

"That don't necessarily follow," Jack laughed, for he saw that George actually had the subject on his mind, and was deeply interested. "The boat might have been in any one of twenty little coves we passed on the way down. Or, again, she could have been prowling in some of the many passages about the Narrows."

"All right," George declared, stubbornly, as though his mind were set, and nothing could move him; "you mark my word, Jack, we'll set eyes on that sneaker again, before we're done with this trip."

"Oh, perhaps!" said Jack, turning away, as though the subject did not interest him to any great extent; for he did not happen to be built on the same lines as his chum, who had a little more than his share both of suspicion and also curiosity.

The next day they anxiously waited for Jack's decision; but the wind was much too

strong, and from a quarter that caused white-caps to appear out on the ocean.

So the start had to be postponed, much to the regret of the entire six, all of whom wished to get the dangerous run over with as speedily as possible.

"Better luck tomorrow, fellows," said Jack, who had made it a point to look at things in the light that it was foolish to worry over what could not be altered.

"Then here's to put in a whole day, fishing over on that pier at the beach," declared Nick, making a run for the place where the three motor boats were at anchor.

"Whirra! now, if ye do be afther thinking ye're going to get me goat, it's another guess ye do be having, I'm telling ye, Nick, me bhoy!" remarked Jimmy, as he also hastened away.

And they kept diligently at it through the better part of the entire day, though with indifferent success. Either the fish were shy, knowing the grim determination of the two patient anglers, or else it was a poor day for the sport.

When they mutually agreed to give it up, while they had a mess that would do for supper, neither of them had added any notch to his record for big fish.

As October is possibly the best time of the year to expect quiet weather along the South Atlantic coast, Jack had high hopes that the morrow would see them on their way toward Miami. Nor were his expectations doomed to disappointment, for in the morning there seemed to be not the slightest reason for further postponing the run.

Accordingly hurried preparations for breakfast were made, in order to take full advantake of the opportunity.

All of them were glad when they made the dash over the Lake Worth bar in good order, and found themselves on the heaving bosom of the mighty sea, with their motor boats pointing to the south.

Steadily they kept on, as the hours passed, and the sun mounted in the sky. Jack was ever on the watch for any sign of a change, knowing what such might mean to cruisers in small boats caught far from a harbor.

Jimmy was watching his face, under the belief that he could tell in that way if any trouble threatened. When he saw how the skipper of the *Tramp* turned his glasses frequently toward the southwest, he took a look in that quarter himself.

"And is it the clouds that do be paping up

along beyant the shore line giving ye concern, Jack?" he asked, a bit anxiously.

"Well, I don't know as they mean much, but all the same I think I'd feel better if we were swinging to our mudhooks back of Key Biscayne," Jack replied.

"About how far do we chanst to be away, this minute?" the other continued.

"All of ten miles, which would mean an hour's run for the *Comfort.* This is the time when she drags us back. George and myself could have made shelter an hour ago, if we had wanted to put on all speed. And I just know George is growling to himself right now, because he has to check his love for racing along."

Jack had hardly said these words when Jimmy broke out into a laugh.

"Now, that do be a toime when ye are away off, me bhoy," he remarked.

"In what way, Jimmy?" demanded the skipper, laying his glasses aside, and taking the wheel from the hands of his helper.

"If so ye take a look over to the blissed ould *Wireless,* upon me worrd ye'll discover that the bally boat has stopped short. Like enough that ingine has gone back on poor George again, just as it always does when we get in a place where it counts. Yes, he's beckoning for

us to come close. That's what it must mean, Jack."

"Whew! that would be tough luck!" muttered Jack, as he changed the course of the little *Tramp,* and again cast an uneasy look in the direction where those suspicious and dark clouds were shoving their heads above the horizon.

A storm, and the *Wireless* helpless—the prospect was surely anything but pleasant.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS POWER BOAT.

"Jerusalem! if I owned that engine, George, do you know what I'd do with it?" Nick was heard to say, as the others drew near. "Why, I'd take the first chance, when in touch with a town, and sink her miles deep. Hang it, I'd be willing to contribute half the money I've got saved, to help get a new engine for the old shaker."

"All right, I take you up on that offer, Nick," George made answer, as quick as a flash; "because, to tell the honest truth, I'm getting weary of the cranky thing myself. But that isn't going to help us any now. Lend a hand here, and let's see what we can do to mend matters."

"Hold on there, fellows," called out Jack.

"Hello! here's the commodore arrived," George sang out, with a nervous little laugh. "Same old story, Jack; and blessed if I can say how long it'll take to fix her up again, so she'll do business. Might be ten minutes; and again I'm afraid it may be something serious this time, that will keep me busy hours."

"Well, we can't stay out here all that time, with a storm in prospect," said Jack.

"Thunder! what's that you say?" broke from the perspiring skipper of the stalled *Wireless,* as his head again bobbed up into view, and he swept an anxious look in all quarters.

"There's a bank of clouds poking up over yonder that may mean trouble," Jack went on to say. "So just get your stoutest cable hitched to a cleat forward, and pass me the other end.

"What for?" asked George.

"I'm going to tow you, that's all," Jack replied.

"Shucks! is that necessary?" demanded the proud George, with a slight frown.

"It sure is, for every furlong we cover now brings us that much nearer a safe harbor; and if those clouds are out for business, we'll need all we can gain," Jack went on to insist.

"Then I suppose I'll just have to," the other continued; "here, Nick, get out the hawser, and I'll clamp it on to this cleat. But see here, Jack, after you get started, Nick can keep watch while I work at the engine, can't he?"

"Nothing for him to do but hold the wheel and keep straight after me. Perhaps when the little *Tramp* does her prettiest, the two of

us can keep going as fast as the *Comfort* goes; and so nothing will have been lost after all, George."

"That's true; only I don't like it one little bit," grunted George, as he commenced to fasten one end of the hawser to the stout little cleat—for, to tell the truth, George was a mighty poor loser.

Once Jack had the other end of the line, he made it secure to the stern of his own staunch boat.

"Here goes now; look out!" he warned, as he started forward once more.

The three boats had been wallowing on the heaving seas while power was shut off; but no sooner did they pick up their course again, than this sickening motion gave way to that of progress.

George took off his coat, and got busy. He was considerable of a mechanic, and at least possessed the commendable trait of persistence. Once he had started to do a thing he never rested satisfied until it was accomplished.

"Seems like you're doing just as well pulling that wreck as we are alone!" called Herb from the *Comfort,* which was not more than fifty feet away.

George's head came into view above the

gunwale of the speed boat, but somehow this time he was feeling quite too bad to take up cudgels in defense of his craft. Besides, there was truth in calling her a wreck just then. So he ducked down once more and pretended not to have heard the sarcastic allusion.

"Just what I expected when I proposed to tow George," Jack answered; and then he turned the glasses ahead to a point that seemed to interest him considerably.

"Think that can be the place?" asked Herb, still watching him closely.

"I believe it is, yes, and hope so, too," came the reply, together with a significant glance upward to where the clouds were beginning to shut out the sun, now on its way down the western sky.

"I see you're edging in more?" Herb continued.

"That's right," answered Jack; "we'd better be as near land as we dare go. It may mean a heap to us sooner or later."

They went on for some time, with things seeming to be no different, only the clouds kept covering the sky, making the water look dark and forbidding. Indeed, all of the boys were now considerably alarmed. The storm seemed to be getting closer, and their haven had not as yet hove in sight.

"That's because we're coming down from the north," explained Jack, when Nick called out to mention this distressing fact. "You see, the trees all run together, and it's next to impossible to tell where the mainland ends off and the key begins. But I think I get the dividing line through the glasses. Anyhow, I'm heading straight for it right now."

Ten minutes later and Josh called out, to say that he could see the opening all right; and the others added their evidence to what he said.

"There's the new breeze coming, Jack!" called Herb.

"Yes, and the harbor is so close too," George put in, as he arose from his lowly position. "But I reckon my engine will go now, Jack. If you hear her crackle, please cast off that hawser, will you?"

"Sure!" sang out Jimmy, as he climbed forward, Jack having taken the wheel himself some little time previous, so as to be prepared for any emergency that might arise.

A moment later and there was a merry popping from the mended motor of the *Wireless,* and immediately Jimmy heard this he cast the rope loose.

"Better make a plunge for it, George; I'll stand by Herb!" sang out Jack.

"But that wouldn't look right," objected George, though doubtless he would feel better satisfied if given a chance to make use of the great speed his boat could show under special conditions, in order to get in a harbor before the blow struck them.

"Rats! get along with you. We understand what your feelings are; but we also know what a cranky boat you've got. Hit her up now, and skedaddle!" called Jack.

"Are you saying that as a chum, or as the commodore of the fleet?" asked George.

"As the commodore; and see to it that you obey orders," answered the other.

Accordingly, George did put his motor to its best speed, and rapidly left them in the lurch. Jack would never desert the steady going old *Comfort,* and that wide-beamed craft was already working her full limit of nine miles to the hour, so nothing could be done but keep moving, and hope for the best.

The wind increased. Luckily it was dead ahead; and while it might retard their progress to some extent, at the same time it did not kick up half the tremendous sea that would have been the case had it come from the wide ocean at their back, or the port side.

"Do ye be thinking we can make it?" asked Jimmy, who looked a little peaked as he squat-

ted there, watching the tumbling waves, and eying wistfully the shores now close at hand, where houses were to be seen.

"I don't doubt it for a minute," answered the resolute skipper of the *Tramp,* who always refused to be downcast when face to face with danger. "We're hitting up a pretty fair pace, and if nothing happens to prevent, in ten minutes we'll begin to get the benefit of the shelter of the land."

"Anyhow, George has gone through the opening," declared Jimmy, hopefully.

"Why, yes, there he is beyant, and in calm water; I do believe he's waiting for us right now. Bully for George! And we ought to be with him soon."

Although the storm increased, they were by now so well in that it had little terror for them. And presently they ran into calmer waters, where the other boat waited for their coming.

After that it did not take the boys long to pick out a nook where they could be sheltered to a great extent from the blow. And here they anchored, very thankful because of their safe arrival near Miami, after making such a record run outside, where their boats looked like tiny chips on the wide, heaving sea.

All of them were tired, and welcomed the coming of night, when they could partake of

supper, and perhaps gather around a campfire ashore.

Jack had seen that there were quite a number of other boats of all kinds scattered around the bay. Some were anchored off cottages, while others scudded for the home port before the storm increased to violent proportions. Although the time for West India hurricanes was long since past, any blow along the coast may mean peril to small craft, and they considered it safer to get into shelter before the worst came.

Jack was doing some little work aboard the *Tramp* when a boat scraped alongside.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as George climbed aboard; "what brings you over here?"

"Let me have your glasses, won't you, Jack?" asked the other, mysteriously.

"That sounds mighty like you though you had made some discovery, George. Say, three to one it's about that power boat that is a ringer for the *Tramp?*"

"Go up head, Jack, because you've guessed it the first clat out of the box. Good for you! Now I'll satisfy my mind about one thing, and find out whether they are watching us every time we happen to run together."

"So that's the boat anchored away over yonder, is it?" Jack mused. "For all we know

it may belong to the Biscayne Bay Yacht Club, and be at home right now."

"Huh! just as I thought," grunted George.

"What's that?" demanded the other.

"There's a feller sitting on deck right now, and I'll be hanged if he hasn't got a pair of marine glasses in his hands, leveled straight at us. Didn't I tell you, Jack, there's something mysterious about that boat? They are keeping tabs on us right along. Perhaps they're down here to follow us, though what for I declare if I can guess. There, I guess he saw I had a pair of glasses leveled at him, for he dodged inside the cabin like a flash. Jack, whatever can it mean?"

"You've got me guessing, George, and I'll have to pass," laughed the other, although admitting to himself that the circumstances were beginning to savor more of mystery than up to now he had been willing to acknowledge.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK TRIES AGAIN.

"Jimmy, strike up a bar of 'Nancy Lee,' or the 'Larboard Watch,' while we're moving at this snail's pace along this shallow shore, looking for some nice place to camp."

"That's right, Jimmy, just as Jack says; it would sound right to hear music, for this is by a long shot the dreariest place we've struck yet. Tune up your lyre, then, or your banjo—I don't care which—and give us a song."

Accordingly, when thus pressed by the skipper, not only of his own boat but Herb as well, Jimmy reached in the cabin, and taking hold of his never far distant banjo, commenced to plunk away.

He had a fine mellow voice, and the rest of the boys never tired of hearing him sing. All of them joined in the chorus, though Josh squeaked so that he would have killed the whole melody, only that the volume of sound was so great the discordant vein could not easily be detected.

The three motor boats were almost drifting along among the many keys bordering the extreme southern shore of Florida; and the time

was just three days after we saw them reach the vicinity of Miami.

They had passed from Cards Sound into Barnes Sound, and marveled at the wonderful construction of the concrete railway arches, by means of which the East Coast Line expected in the near future to reach far distant Key West, passing from key to key the entire distance, often over wide stretches of open sea.

Cape Sable lay not a great distance ahead. Once the little flotilla had rounded this tip end of the peninsula, they would begin their northward voyage.

The prospect for a camp ashore did not look any too brilliant, and as the afternoon waned, even sanguine Jack began to despair of finding any solid ground. In all directions could be seen the interminable mangrove islands, where swamp abounded, and landing was next to absurd.

When the wash of the sea proved too heavy they had managed to keep some key between, and thus far had come on without any accident. Even George's eccentric motor had been upon its best behavior, but none of them placed much reliance upon it any longer.

"The tricky thing just seems to know when to lay down and quit," grumbled Nick, when

George mustered up faith enough to actually say a good word for the engine again. "It bides its time, and when we need it most of all, it flunks. I'm going to hold you to your word, George, when we get to Tampa, where there's a chance to pick up another machine to put in here."

"Oh, all right!" declared the other, "since you agreed to stand for half the expense, why should I have any kick coming? Only I hope the new engine can walk her along as good as this one, when she feels like it."

"Hang the speed part!" cried Nick, again rubbing himself as though his muscles were becoming sore in a chronic way; "if only the plagued thing won't prove a quitter. I hate anything that lies down on you, when you've gone and soaked your trust in it, that's what."

"I think I see a place ahead that looks fairly promising, mates," sang out Jack, at this point in the discussion.

"Good for you, Jack; take us to it right away. I'd give a heap just for a chance to get out and just stand, without feeling my foundation heave and wabble under me. Oh! if only I had money enough to coax George to buy a boat that would let a poor feller part his hair on the side, like he used to do."

A short time later, and they ran in as near

the shore as was deemed advisable. Here they anchored, with a friendly key protecting them from any heavy sea that might come up from the south.

"Here's where the homely little dinky is worth its weight in gold," remarked Jack, as he prepared to go ashore to look around.

"Yes, only for that we'd have to do the great wading act right along; and it ain't always convenient to get wet up to your waist," Herb observed, in a satisfied tone.

Having taken in the prospect ashore, Jack came back again.

"It's all right, fellows," he announced. "High ground for half a mile inland, and if the bugs allow, we can even sleep ashore tonight."

"Hurrah! that's grand news you're bringing us, Commodore!" cried Nick, looking happy again. "Now won't I get the kinks out of my system, though? Last night aboard nearly did for me, and that's no lie, either."

"Huh!" George gave vent to one of his odd grunts, adding: "I reckon it was nearly the end of me, for you kicked like a steer, and came within an ace of smothering me the time you rolled over, crowding me to the wall."

While they were thus joshing each other, all hands were busily engaged getting such things

aboard the little tenders as they knew they would need for cooking supper ashore. If it were later on decided to remain there during the night, they could come out again to the anchored motor boats, and secure blankets, mosquito nets, and what other things were required.

As usual, they commenced doing various things, each according to his taste.

George had gone back again to his beloved boat, doubtless to tinker with her eccentric engine, which he always found a puzzle. Nick wandered off along the shore, as though looking for shells. Jimmy was pottering with some of his strong fishing tackle as though he had designs on the scaly denizens of Barnes Sound, and intended putting out several night set lines, if Jack could secure any mullet for bait. Herb was stretching himself on the sand, while Jack and Josh built a little fireplace for cooking, making good use of some blocks of coquina rock, a mixture of shells and what looked like cement, and which underlies much of the eastern shore of Florida.

Presently Jack saw Nick come breathlessly back. He did not say a word to any one, but, putting off in one of the dinkies, went aboard the *Wireless*. Two minutes later he appeared again, and Jack saw to his surprise that he

was trying to hide a piece of stout rope under his coat.

Of course, his curiosity was aroused, but he did not say anything either to Nick or the others. The fat boy, casting a suspicious glance around, and with a wide grin on his face when he looked at Jimmy in particular, again sauntered off. Jack noticed that when he thought he had passed beyond their range of vision, Nick actually started on a run. No wonder he had seemed breathless when he came in, if that was what he had been doing.

"What can the sly fellow be up to?" Jack said to himself. "I believe I'd better keep an eye open, for he's always so ready to tumble into trouble."

So as he worked alongside Jimmy, he kept his eyes and ears on the alert. Perhaps fifteen minutes passed. Then those in camp heard a husky call that caused them to look up the shore.

It chanced that there was a clump of mangroves at the nearby point, and around this Nick hove in sight. He seemed to have harnessed himself in some fashion with the rope, and was tugging with might and main.

"Now, what under the sun can he be doing?" ejaculated the surprised Herb.

"He's got something along, and seems to be

dragging it through the shallow water!" Josh declared.

"And look at it splash, would you?" Herb went on. "Say, d'ye suppose, now, Nick's gone and caught a turtle, one of those big loggerheads they were telling us about?"

"Turtle nothing!" laughed Jack; "that's a fish!"

"A fish!" cried Jimmy, turning pale; "do ye mane to till me he's gone and caught a *whale?*"

Evidently Jimmy feared for his laurels; he had held the position of top-notch in the competition almost from the start, and was beginning to believe that he might never be ousted by the slow-moving fat boy. And hence the sight of Nick deliberately dragging that immense bulk behind him gave Jimmy a bad sensation.

As the puffing Nick arrived alongside, it was seen that he had indeed been dragging a tremendous fish after him. The rope was twisted under its gills in such a way that it could not come loose.

"What in the dickens is it?" demanded Herb.

"Blest if I know; but it's a *fish,* and that's enough for me!" announced the red-faced captor.

"Be afther listening to him, now, bhoys," observed Jimmy, looking dismayed; "by the pipers if he doesn't mane to claim he caught it!"

"Of course, I do!" exclaimed Nick, instantly; "and I'd like to know how you're going to knock me out of this, like you did that shark. Here I go fastening on to all sorts of big game, and you always want to question my right."

"What kind of a fish is it, Jack?" called George, who was coming ashore to take a closer look at the squirming victim.

"It looks squatty, like a big sea bass, the kind we caught several times along the coast. I rather think it's what they call a jewfish down here," Jack replied, after looking the prisoner over.

"Good to eat?" asked Nick, hungrily.

"Oh, yes; they say so; and we'll take a chunk out of him to try," was Jack's answer. "Where did you get him, Nick?"

"Up the shore a little ways. Do I have to tell just how, Jack?"

"See him try to back out," jeered the envious Jimmy, as his eyes took in the enormous bulk of the prize, and he mentally figured that it must weigh all of two hundred pounds,

against which his bass of fifteen must look like a baby.

"Yes, we want to know everything, so begin," declared George.

"Well, when I was walking along, I discovered this silly thing splashing like Sam Hill close to the shore. He must have been left by the tide, and was half stranded between two bunches of coquina rock. I had a sudden wild idea, and hurried back here to get a rope."

"So that's why you wanted it, was it?" cried George. "I was a little afraid you might be thinking of hanging yourself; but then I expected the rope would break if you tried that. But go on, Nick."

"Oh, there ain't much to tell, for I just harnessed the old chap up like you see, worked him loose from the rocky wedge, and dragged him to camp. But I hope now, after all my hard work, you ain't going to say I didn't catch that fish. Anyway, our rules read so long as a feller gets the game by fair means, and without help. Here he is, and you can rig up some sort of scales to weigh him. What's a few pounds, more or less, among friends? But what do you say, Jack, Herb, Josh and George?"

"Why, according to the letter of the rules, you win," Jack remarked.

"That's correct," ventured Josh.

"He lost one whopper because he had to have help; but that can't be said about this prize. Nick, you certainly take the cake," Herb chuckled.

"I agree with the rest; he deserves all he gets," said George.

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders, and made a grimace, as he observed:

"Sure, I do belave the lot of ye are set agin me; but, honest to Injun, in me own hearrt I do be thinkin' the same. Which laves me a bad second in the race. But I do not despair of batin' him out yet. Just give me toime, bhoys, give me toime to get me wits together."

Jack busied himself rigging up a crude scales, whereby two of them could stand out against the big fish; and in this way it was finally estimated that Nick's latest capture weighed about two hundred and thirty pounds.

The fat boy was in high glee over his adventure, and burst out into frequent boasts. He took especial pains to let Jimmy know that the one who laughed last always laughed hardest.

"Just wait, and say how that same turns out," declared the Irish lad, seemingly only

the more determined to exceed Nick's big score.

So the afternoon passed away, and it came on toward evening.

"Hello! how's this?" remarked Jack, who had been out with George for some time, taking a look at his motor, and consulting as to the wisdom of making a radical change when they reached the city of Tampa; "it's coming on night, and I don't see any signs of supper in sight. And by the way, where is Josh; I don't happen to set eyes on him around?"

The others stared at each other.

"Why, I remember now, that he asked me for the loan of my gun some little while back, and said he'd like to take a stroll down the beach, thinking there might be a bunch of those nice little shore birds on some mud flat, that he could bring back with him," Herb said, looking perplexed.

"How long ago was that?" Jack demanded.

"I guess all of an hour; just after you went out when George called."

"Has anybody heard a shot?" asked Jack.

But nobody had; and, as the night came on, the five boys began to realize that something must surely have happened to their lengthy chum.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST CHUM.

Uneasiness increased as the shadows of night began to fall around them; and the motor boat boys cast many anxious glances toward the gloomy patches of mangroves along the shore, as well as the denser sawgrass, dwarf palmetto and trees that covered the mainland.

"I don't like this at all," Jack finally declared. "We've shouted enough for any one with ears, within half a mile, to have heard us."

"And never had a peep from Josh, that's a fact," declared Nick, whose cheeks had lost some of their customary color, in the face of this mystery; for he was very fond of the absent chum.

"Whatever could have happened to the lad?" asked Jimmy.

"It seems hard to believe that he could have lost himself, and wandered so far away that he couldn't fire his gun, or hear us yell," Herb observed, frowning.

George plucked at the sleeve of Jack, as he remarked in a low, nervous tone:

"Now, you don't believe *they* could have had anything to do with our chum's disappearance, do you?"

"What in the wide world are you speaking about?" demanded the other, startled for the moment by the grave way in which George said this.

"Why, you know, that queer lot in the boat that was a ringer for the *Tramp,*" was what George added, quickly.

"Oh! come now, what put that silly notion in your head?" asked Jack; though at the same time he could not but weigh the startling proposition advanced by George in his mind, and find himself impressed more or less by its possibility.

"I suppose," George went on, "because, for the life of me, I just can't imagine any other reason why the fellow wouldn't do *something* to let us know he was alive. If he discovered that he was lost, I'm dead sure Josh would have sense enough to holler, and fire his gun several times in succession."

"And we never heard the first sign," declared Herb.

"Well, I've just stood it as long as I mean to," declared Jack.

"Yes; let's get busy and do something," George burst out with, for he was ever an im-

petuous fellow, eager to be accomplishing things, and getting to his intended goal by a short-cut, if possible.

"Jack, say what, and we'll stand by you," Herb spoke up, with a look of grim determination on his face.

"Them's my sentiments!" affirmed Jimmy.

"Say the word, and we'll all back you up, Commodore!" Nick put in, puffing his cheeks out, and looking very fierce—for him.

"Well, there's an old saying, you remember," Jack remarked, "to the effect that if the mountain won't come to you, the next best thing is to go to the mountain. And if Josh hangs fire about returning to camp, why, some of us have got to get a hustle on, and look him up. That's plain enough, I hope."

"It sure is; and we expect you to be the one to lead the rescue party, Jack," George declared.

"All right; and as there's no time to be lost, let's get busy. Somebody has to stay here, and guard the camp; and I appoint Nick as the fellow to take that duty on his shoulders."

When Jack made this declaration, Nick started, and seemed to shiver a little; but, realizing that all eyes were turned toward him, he braced up again.

"Oh! all right, Jack, just as you say," he expressed himself.

"Understand," Jack explained, seeing that the fat boy felt hurt; "it isn't because there's any doubt about your courage and all that; but none of us can say how far we may have to tramp, or what swamps we'll have to wade through; and you admit, Nick, that you're not fitted for campaigning in that line as well as some of the rest of us."

"Sure, I know that," said Nick, heaving a sigh.

"But," continued Jack, as though he had had a second thought, "as three of us ought to be enough, I guess I'll leave a second guard behind. Herb, would you mind staying, to keep Nick company? It's just as much a post of honor as going with George, Jimmy and myself. And you'll have to keep watch all the time."

"Oh! I'm ready to do just what you say, Jack. I believe you know best; and while of course I'd rather be with the hunting party, count on me holding up the other end with Nick here," Herb hastened to declare.

"Then that's settled," Jack went on, relieved to find that his plans were meeting with next to no opposition. "Of course you'll have your gun, while each of us will go armed; for

there's no telling what we may meet up with. I'll take the rifle, while George and Jimmy have the scatter-guns."

"Yes, and if you find Josh, how will you let us know?" Herb asked.

"I'll fire six shots at regular intervals of about two seconds apart. Be sure to count them carefully if you hear any firing, because in case we meet up with a prowling panther, or anything like that, the shooting would be more rapid."

When Jack mentioned that one word "panther," it might have been observed that Nick's mouth opened, as if sudden dismay had seized hold upon him. However, once more he summoned his nerve to the fore, and shut his teeth hard together. It was Herb, fortunately, who advanced the proposition that must have been buzzing in the brain of the more timid Nick.

"After you've gone, Jack, perhaps it would be just as well for Nick and myself to go aboard the boats, and hold the fort there. We'll make sure to keep the fire burning all the while, so you'll have a signal on the shore, to tell where we are. Is that right, fellows?" he remarked.

"Best thing you could do; and I was just going to say something like that," was the way Jack put it.

George had made haste to secure the guns, and each of the three now held a weapon in his hands. They looked very warlike and grim, as the camp-fire shone on the polished steel; and Nick could, after all, be pardoned for showing signs of excitement as they prepared to start off. For Nick was in the main a peaceable lad, who liked not strife under any conditions.

"Perhaps we'd better give one more halloo before we go?" suggested George; for the idea of tramping into that mysterious wilderness, with its swamps and unknown perils, was not to be treated lightly as a picnic, by any means.

So they all raised their voices, and sent out a series of whoops that might have made any Indian warrior envious.

"Listen!" cried Jack, after this had gone on for a full minute.

The last echo had died away, and complete silence followed.

"Never a thing!" exclaimed George.

"Oh! hark! what is that?" cried Nick, eagerly.

"Only an owl far away, answering us," Jack declared, promptly.

"Must think we're trying to give him the laugh," Herb remarked; although he was feeling in anything but a joking mood, with the

strange disappearance of Josh weighing on his mind so heavily.

"Come on, boys," Jack called out. "I've got the lantern lighted, and we'll try our luck following his trail as long as we are able to see it. Oh! and Herb, if you and Nick want, you might as well eat something while we're gone."

"Nixy for me," Herb made answer. "My appetite seems to have gone up the flue. But we could be cooking something, in case you found Josh, and all came in hungry."

"Sure, that's right," Nick hastened to add. "It'll give us something to keep our minds busy, and that means a whole lot. Good-bye, boys; and the best of luck!"

"We sure hope you find our chum, safe and sound," Herb added, feelingly.

"One thing more," Jack went on to say; "If Josh should happen in while we're gone, you'll want to let us know."

"That's right; I hadn't thought of that," said Herb.

"Then listen. Fire both barrels of your gun, about two seconds apart. Then repeat the volley twice more, making six shots in all. We'll understand what you want to tell us, and that we're needed here. That's all. Come on, George and Jimmy."

Nick watched them pass away, and the face of the fat boy told that his soul was troubled. Yet it was not so much of himself he thought, but the strange mystery hovering over this vanishing of Josh.

Jack knew where the long-legged would-be hunter had last been seen, and accordingly he made direct for that spot.

Evidently he had no especial trouble in discovering the tracks left by the heels of Josh's shoes, for those left behind saw the trio move directly away. Soon the flitting glimmer of the moving lantern vanished entirely among the thickets covering the land in places.

Josh had headed down the shore when he went forth to try and add to the camp larder by knocking down a bunch of the tasty little snipe and other shore birds, flocks of which were seen whenever the tide changed, and the mud flats became partly bare.

That meant he had gone west, for the boys had fallen into the habit of saying "down" as long as they were headed south; and until they turned up the coast it would continue that way.

Jack led with his lantern, and carrying the rifle in his other hand. For some little time the three boys kept on this way. When the tracks became harder to see, Jack used his

judgment, and managed to pick up the trail again every time.

All the while George and Jimmy were casting uneasy looks ahead. The moon being past its prime, would not rise for some time; and as a consequence all was pitch darkness around them. It was easy to imagine all sorts of perils lurking in that gloom beyond. Every simple little sound, such as a stray 'coon scampering away at the coming of the swinging light, caused them a new quiver.

George could not get that strange motor boat out of his mind. He believed that it had left Miami ahead of them, for it was gone on the morning after their arrival. And the chances were that it had come down here ahead of them.

Having more or less of a vivid imagination, George was picturing all sorts of strange things as happening. He even looked back along the career of their chum, Josh, trying to figure out some romantic reason for these people on the strange craft to want to kidnap the long-legged youth.

Despite his best efforts, however, this was pretty much a failure. There never was a fellow with more of an ordinary every-day past than the said Josh. George had known him since they were kids together, first starting

in to school. His father was one of the substantial men of the town; and, so far as George knew, there had never been even the faintest rumor of anything singular attaching to the Purdue family.

So George, baffled in this respect, had to give it up, and confess himself altogether at sea. But if Josh had simply gone and lost himself, then why had he not answered their shouts?

They had now been following the trail of the missing chum quite some time, and found themselves at a considerable distance from camp. Every now and then, apparently, Josh had made his way to the shore, to find out whether there were any flocks of birds in sight; but as he still kept moving on, he evidently met with disappointment.

That he continued to wander on was evidence of a determination to find some sort of game. Josh was not much of a hunter, and he did hate to be unmercifully guyed by Jimmy and Nick, whenever he came back empty handed.

"It can't be long now, before we make some sort of discovery," George finally remarked.

"I agree with you," Jack said, over his shoulder.

"How far are we from camp now, Jack?" continued the skipper of the *Wireless*.

"Perhaps a mile, more or less," answered the pilot of the expedition.

"But not so far as to be beyond the sound of the yell we put up, eh?" continued George.

"Unless Josh suddenly became stone deaf, he must have heard us," replied the other.

"See here; you've got something on your mind; why not share it with us, Jack? You're bothered about something, too. If it don't take in those queer acting fellows on the power boat, what does ail you?" and George caught hold of his chum as the other arose from examining the trail once more.

"Oh! I don't know as there could be anything in it," Jack admitted, slowly, as if loth to air his secret fears.

"But tell us what you do think, even if it does seem impossible, Jack."

"Only this, that if our chum chanced to slip into some muck bed, he might have been sucked down in the slimy stuff before he could even shout for help," was the gruesome remark to which Jack gave utterance.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRACKED TO THE BAYOU.

"Oh! I hope it won't turn out as bad as that, Jack!" gasped George.

"The poor spalpeen!" whimpered Jimmy, apparently shocked by what their leader had just remarked.

"Now," Jack hastened to say, "don't make up your minds, boys, that Josh has run against that sort of a hard deal, just because it flashed into my mind. You wanted to know why I was in such a sweat, and I told you. But, honest Injun, after I've spoken my mind, I just can't bring myself to believe it. We'll find our chum, sooner or later. Perhaps, after all, it'll turn out that he had a bad tumble, and hurt himself so he wasn't able to let us know."

"Well, as long as we're able to follow his trail, we hadn't ought to give up in despair," George asserted, very sensibly.

"Sure, we've shown in the past that we're not built that way," Jimmy thought fit to remark, firmly.

"Then let's be going on," Jack wound up the conference by saying.

For the fifth time the trail approached the water again. Josh evidently hated to give up the idea that had been in his mind when he left camp. If there were any of those dainty little shore birds to be had, he wanted to get a crack at the same; though by this time he must have become aware of the fact that he was wandering much farther away than he had intended doing in the start.

This time there happened to be quite a deep-seated cove, with a point of land running out that would completely shut out all sight of the spot where the three motor boats were anchored, with the camp-fire ashore.

Jack noted this fact; somehow it was impressed on his mind, though he could not have exactly explained why this should be so, had he been asked.

The tracks grew fainter, so that it was only by pushing the glowing and useful lantern down close to the sand that Jack was able to follow the line by which Josh had pushed his way along.

"Here is where he dropped on his knees, the better to crawl forward," whispered the guide; and both George and Jimmy could make out the deeper impressions that undoubtedly must have been made by a pair of knees pressing down.

There was a screen of saw palmetto in front of them, hiding the water. Perhaps Josh had discovered a flock of the coveted birds on a bar, and was making his way to a point he had in mind, where he might suddenly rise, and fire. But something must have prevented his carrying out this plan, then, for certainly the sound of a heavy shotgun charge could have been heard at the camp, had he pulled trigger. "Wait here for me, and keep quiet," whispered Jack, as, leaving the lantern on the ground, he started away.

His two companions were rendered almost speechless by his strange action. They could only stare at each other, and nod their heads, as though striving in this way to communicate their fears.

In two minutes Jack came back. He looked disappointed as he stooped to pick up the lantern again.

"Nothing doing, boys," he said, quietly.

"They don't seem to be, and that's a fact," mumbled Jimmy, much depressed.

"See here, what did you expect to find when you went on there?" demanded George, immediately suspicious. "Was it anything about that bally old boat, the one that's been dogging us all the way down from Jacksonville? Tell me that, Jack, old top!"

"H'm! perhaps it may be the people aboard that same boat have come to the conclusion *we're* doing the dogging. They run across us in all sorts of unexpected places. And if you stop to remember, George, it's the other boat that has always slipped away secretly, not us!"

"You're right, it was," George flashed up; "but you didn't answer my question, Jack."

"Well, I did have your pet hobby in mind when I went on just now, to take a look at this fine little lagoon; because, with that point of land standing in a half-moon curve, it looks like a splendid harbor for small boats. And, to tell you the truth, I picked up the butt end of a cigarette just back there five feet, one that was thrown away recently, because no rain or dew had fallen on it!"

"Whew! now, that does look suspicious, I must say," George exclaimed, in a low and cautious voice.

"But there isn't a sign of any boat in the bayou, as far as I could see," Jack went on. "Of course, it's so dark now that I wasn't able to take in the whole bay; but, anyhow, there isn't a light visible."

"And now, what nixt?" asked Jimmy, eager to get at the solution of this perplexing problem, which was thrilling their nerves more and more as they made progress.

For answer, Jack moved forward, this time using the friendly lantern as before. Brushing through the screen of saw palmettos, they could see the water lapping the shore of the lagoon, though there were still bushes and tall grass between.

"Hello!"

Uttering this exclamation half under his breath, the leader of the trio suddenly came to a halt. Jimmy half raised the gun he was carrying, as though under the impression that they were about to be confronted by something, either a human enemy or one in the way of a wild beast, that would bar their further progress.

Then he saw that Jack, instead of showing signs of preparing for battle, was on his knees, eagerly examining certain marks in the sand.

"What have you found?" asked George, in an awed tone.

"As near as I can make out, there are tracks that seem to tell of a scuffle!" was the ready reply, as Jack pointed here and there.

"By the great horn spoon, but I believe you're right!" gasped George.

"It's either that, now, or else the gossoon's been and had a fit," Jimmy declared, though he could not remember that Josh had ever been addicted to such things.

"No; there have been two men here," said Jack.

"Glory be!" ejaculated the Irish lad.

"Tell us how you know that, Jack?" asked George, his face struggling between a grin and a look of alarm.

"Why, it's as plain as print; and if you look here, you'll see the marks of their shoes. Both seem much larger than Josh ever made, and yet they are different, for one had heels, and the other must have been wearing some sort of moccasin, perhaps the kind I've got, to be used aboard a small, varnished decked boat, so as to avoid scratching."

"Didn't I say so?" burst out George, unable to hold in any longer. "After this you won't think I'm off my base when I mention my suspicions about fellows who run away in the night, peek through marine glasses at us every chance they get, and just act like a parcel of sneaks. Jack, that fly-up-the-creek power boat must have been in this bayou when our chum came crawling through these bushes, and took a look out."

"That's about what I'm thinking, now," admitted the other.

"Some of the men happened to be ashore, and saw him spying on the boat? Is that in line with what you think, Jack?"

"It looks that way. Two unknown parties certainly dropped down on Josh while he was lying here. He put up as good a fight as he could, but they were too much for the poor fellow," Jack went on, looking as though he might be reading all these things from the marks upon the sand.

"But you don't say any signs of blood, do ye, Jack darlint?" asked Jimmy, with a plain vein of horror in his quavering voice.

"No, I'm glad to say I don't," replied the other. "So, on that account it would seem that the fellows haven't actually hurt Josh, only made him a prisoner."

Jimmy gave a bleat, not unlike the pitiful sound a distressed goat might emit.

"Och! thin the bally rascals have carried him away wid them, and we'll niver set eyes on our chum agin. Whirra! whativer will Nick do about his rations, if the cook of the bunch be lost, strayed or stolen?" he whimpered.

"Nick be hanged!" said George, vehemently, though in a low tone; "never fear but he'll get all he wants to eat. What we have to find out is where they've gone, and why they dared carry Josh Purdue away with them. And we'll just do that same, if it takes the whole

of the winter. You hear me speaking, don't you? Oh! what did you do that for, Jack?"

This last sentence was caused by a sudden action on the part of Jack. He had raised the lantern, and with a quick, downward motion caused the light to go out—a trick readily learned by any one who will take the trouble to experiment. And thus they were left standing there in the dark.

"How under the sun did it happen that none of us saw it before?" Jack was softly saying, in a vexed tone, as though he had made a discovery that agitated him.

"Saw what?" asked George.

"Bend your head this way, and look yonder through the bushes," Jack told him.

"Great governor!" whispered the *Wireless* skipper, hoarsely; "it *is* a light, as sure as shooting! And on the water, too, Jack. Say, that power boat must be over there, in another bayou just beyond. There's a neck of land runs out, and it's covered with trees and scrub. That's why we didn't glimpse that light before."

"You've hit the nail on the head, George, for that's just the way the land lies," Jack went on, trying to control his voice, which would tremble a little despite his utmost endeavors. "But perhaps that light wasn't

shining a bit ago. There, look! it's disappeared again."

"That's what it has," Jimmy observed, having been an interested observer all the while; "just for all the worrld loike a windy had been opened, and shut again. I do be thinking mesilf that somebody was afther coming out of the cabin to take a look around, and lift the door open the while, that's all. Now he's gone in again, by the same token."

"I hope, then, he didn't just catch a glimpse of our light moving, before I doused the glim," was the fervent wish expressed by Jack.

"I hardly think he did, Jack," George said, nervously. "You see, it was standing on the ground up to the time you grabbed it up again. But what ought we do now?"

"Make our way around that tongue of land the best way we can, and see how things are there," Jack replied, without the slightest hesitation.

"Why not follow the beach around?" George suggested.

"Now, that wouldn't be a bad scheme. It's so dark that if we kept low, they couldn't see us moving. And, besides, it'll save a lot of scrambling through that brush, without the help of the lantern. All right; come along

then, boys. And let's remember to keep as quiet as an owl in the daytime."

Saying this in a whisper, Jack led the way, the others following along in Indian file at his heels. Whenever he halted for any reason, both George and Jimmy would also draw up instantly. And no doubt, on every occasion of this sort, their excited pulses would cause their hearts to beat like trip-hammers.

Just as they had guessed, there was a point of land running out all of seventy feet into the water, and hiding the next bayou. Sometimes these extend from the main Florida shore around Barnes Sound like the fingers of a human hand. Again they will be in the form of reefs, composed of small, sharp-edged 'coon oysters, that stick up out of the salt water at low tide, but are entirely submerged when the flood comes on.

Before reaching the extreme point, Jack concluded that it would be wise for them to pass over here, rather than risk discovery by going to the limit of the cape; where, with the white sand to serve as a background to their darker bodies, some one on the watch might discover their approach, and give warning.

"Jack, I see it!" whispered George, presently.

"The boat, you mean," replied the other, in the same guarded tone. "Yes, I've caught her, too. But everything seems to be dark around."

"I wonder now, have they deserted the ould craft," suggested Jimmie.

"Not so loud, Jimmie; we've got to find that out for ourselves," Jack went on.

"By going aboard, you mean, don't you, Jack?" from eager George.

"There's no other way; and if these people are holding our chum a prisoner, we've just got to let them know we object to such a high-handed business. Are you both willing to stand back of me, George, Jimmy?"

"Every time," George replied; and Jack could easily imagine how his excitable chum must be nerved up to the highest tension.

"Ye c'n count on me, through thick and thin, sink or shwim, survive or perish," Jimmy put in, as solemnly as though he might be holding up his hand, and subscribing to the oath before the court.

"Then come on, and we'll take the bull by the horns," said Jack, moving forward through the thin growth that marked the spit of land near its terminus.

"And don't let's forget, fellows, that we're armed to the teeth," whispered George, as he set out to trail close behind his leader.

In this manner, then, the three motor boat boys crawled across to the shore of the other little bayou, bent upon making a bold move looking to rescuing their comrade, if so be Josh were found to be a prisoner in the hands of the strangers.

CHAPTER IX.

FOR THE SAKE OF CHUM JOSH.

It seemed to Jack Stormways that all his senses must be on the alert as never before. Even the slightest sound caught his attention —the rustling of a prowling 'coon through the saw palmetto scrub; the splash of some fish jumping out of the water of the lagoon; and from a distance came strange, querulous noises which he guessed must proceed from some bird roost, situated in the depths of a swamp, although Jack knew very little about such places from actual experience.

Having passed partly over the point of land, they could just begin to make out the boat that lay in the next bayou. And George's imagination worked overtime, so that he was positive he could recognize the familiar outlines of the craft that looked like the *Tramp*.

Once Jack came to a stop. Possibly he only meant to take an observation, in order to make sure that the coast was clear; but the other boys at once jumped to the conclusion that he had seen some sign of trouble ahead.

"What is it?" whispered George, making a nervous forward thrust with his gun, as though

eager to mix up, if so be one came along; while Jimmy edged up on the other side, quivering with anxiety, too.

Jack bent his head lower before making a reply; for he knew the danger of allowing his voice to rise above the faintest murmur. The lapping of the waves on the sandy beach close by, together with those strange sounds from the interior, might go far toward muffling speech, but if suspicious ears were on the alert it were folly to take unnecessary chances.

"Nothing. I was only looking. All seems quiet, boys, so come on," he said; and no doubt the throbbing hearts of the other lads eased down in the strain.

So once more they started to advance, with the border of the lagoon now close at hand. All of them could by this time make out the fact that the boat must be anchored in shallow water near the shore. Perhaps those aboard had neglected to provide themselves with a dinky; and in consequence had to rely upon finding some place where they could push the power boat in, by loosening the anchor cable.

The light breeze that caused the waves to gently roll up on the sand was coming from the southwest. Hence it was that the boat lay almost stern on, showing part of her starboard quarter.

When they had reached a point close to the water's edge, the three boys again instinctively came to a halt, to once more scrutinize the craft.

No lantern hung there to serve as a riding light; it was not needed, as would have been the case in a crowded harbor. Faint, indeed, the chance of any other boat running them down here in this secluded spot.

George had unconsciously laid a hand on the arm of Jack as they thus crouched and gazed. His fingers suddenly tightened their hold.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "did you see that?"

" 'Sh!" breathed Jack, hastily. "Yes, I was watching. Some one brushed aside the curtain that covers the cabin bullseye, and light shone through. That settles one thing, George."

"That they're aboard!" echoed the other.

"Yes."

"But, we go on, don't we, Jack?" begged the impetuous George.

"I should say, yes; for we believe our chum is being held a prisoner on that same boat. Make your mind easy, both of you; it isn't going to get away from us now. We've gone too far to hold back."

"That's the stuff!" whispered the delighted

George; while Jimmy muttered his assent, which was none the less fervent because the words were inaudible.

Once before, on a cruise the motor boys were making on the waters of the faraway North, they had had a stirring encounter with some lawless men who were fleeing from officers sent to apprehend them. On that occasion Jack and his chums had managed to give considerable assistance to the legal authorities; and it was largely through their work that the fugitives were finally apprehended.

No doubt this circumstance must have loomed up large in the memory of George right then and there. He had long ago made up his mind that the mysterious persons on board the boat that looked like the *Tramp* were a couple of rascals, who felt afraid of the cruisers for some reason or other. And now, that it seemed they had set upon poor Josh, making him prisoner, and carrying him aboard, the conditions became darker than ever.

It was the greatest mystery the boys had ever struck. Even Jack, with his usual keen intellect, was utterly unable to determine what these men could want with the missing crew of the *Comfort;* Josh, a fellow who seldom

made enemies among his companions, and simply devoid of evil intent.

Perhaps they had discovered him creeping through the scrub, either to get a shot at some shore birds or to examine the anchored power boat, in which he knew George at least was deeply interested. If they were men fleeing from the sheriff, his actions might have looked so suspicious to them that they were impelled to pounce on him without giving warning.

Many were the explanations that surged through the excited brains of the three lads in the brief space of time occupied in reaching the shore of the second lagoon.

As they stood there, George and Jimmy content to follow the lead of Jack, no matter what that might mean, a low murmur came to them. It was as if those inside the cabin of the boat might be conversing among themselves.

Jack listened intently. Perhaps he even entertained a faint hope that he might hear the high-pitched voice of Josh above the rest; for the tall boy had a way of using the rising inflection when in the least excited. But the fact of the cabin being closed prevented his discovering any marked difference between the tones of those who were speaking.

George and Jimmy were waiting to see what means their leader would adopt, in order to

gain the deck of the little craft. The boat lay at a distance of perhaps twenty feet from the edge of the water. Judging from the fact that the beach was sandy there could be no question but what, if they picked their way, they might be able to wade out, without getting in any deeper than hip-high at most.

When Jack hesitated for that half minute, with the little waves crawling up to his feet, it was because he wished to make sure that there was no one upon the stern of the swinging power boat, to discover their advance.

Having made sure of this fact, he would boldly push forward, entering the water, regardless of the fact that their shoes must suffer in consequence.

When he took the first step, the others were alongside. They fancied that the time had gone by for them to follow *after* Jack; if a battle were imminent, their place must be on the firing line, where numbers would count for something. For did they not grip weapons as well as Jack; and were they not just as anxious to effect the rescue of their missing chum?

Once Jimmy stumbled, and made quite a little splash ere he recovered his footing. It may have been a jellyfish upon which he placed his foot, and which caused him to slide; or some obstacle in the shape of a clump of 'coon

oysters. The cause was immaterial; but what splash he made gave them all a thrill, since they fully expected that it would bring about discovery.

At the time it chanced that they had passed over more than half the distance separating them from the boat, and were standing up to their knees in the water.

Jack noted that the murmurous sound which they had decided must be the mingling of voices, had suddenly stopped. From this he imagined that those within the closed cabin of the power boat had heard the splash and were waiting for a repetition of the same, in order to gauge its meaning.

Would they come out to investigate? If so, what should be the programme of the three who stood there in the water? None of them had ever fired a shot at a human being in all their lives; and the mere thought of such a thing was distasteful to them. At the same time, if their comrade were in the hands of unscrupulous men, and heroic measures had to be adopted in order to effect his release, not one of them would hesitate.

Jack often looked back to that strained moment, when he and his comrades stood there, knee deep in the lagoon, within a dozen feet of the mysterious little power boat, keyed

up to a condition when their nerves were all on edge, and waiting for whatever might happen. He could feel a sense of amusement over it, too, at some future time; but it was certainly no laughing matter then.

Then there suddenly flashed out a broad beam of light. The door of the cabin had been opened; and, as those standing there in the water were directly behind the stern, the light fell full upon them.

Jack saw a figure push into view. Outlined against the lighted interior of the boat it stood up in plain sight, and they could even make out the fact that the unknown party wore knickerbockers, as though dressed for an outing.

Of course he must have discovered the threatening trio there just as soon as he thus partly emerged from the cabin. They could tell this from the way in which he stood as if riveted to the spot, making no motion either to advance further, or retreat back into the recesses of the boat's interior.

Jack did not mean to give him a chance to take the initiative. He raised his gun, and immediately covered the unknown party; which action was accepted as proof by his two chums that they were to follow suit, and they proceeded to do so.

If astonishment had held the man motionless up to this moment, a due sense of caution kept him so after he discovered those three menacing guns turned full in his direction. Apparently he must be either stunned by the situation that had burst upon him without warning; or else he kept his head, and knew there was only one thing to do in order to avoid trouble, which was to submit to the inevitable.

"Don't think of trying to drop back into that cabin," said Jack, in a voice that was quite stern, even if it did quiver a little; "we've got you covered all right, and you might as well surrender!"

"That's the ticket!" rasped George, trying to seem very formidable, in order to hide the fact that his knees were knocking together just a trifle, with excitement of course, not fear!

CHAPTER X.

ABOARD THE STRANGE POWER BOAT.

"Well, this *is* a rich joke!" laughed the man. "Just keep your fingers from pressing those triggers, please, boys. No danger of my trying the disappearing act. Fact is, we've been expecting you to come along for some time now."

Jack was not going to allow himself to be deceived. "Soft words buttered no parsnips," he had often heard his mother say; and because this unknown fellow chose to talk smoothly, was no sign that he should be trusted.

And so he continued to keep his gun raised, seeing which the others did likewise.

"That's nice, to hear you say such fine things; but what we want to know is, what have you done with our chum?" he demanded.

"Yes, tell us that!" said George, menacingly.

"Sure, we want to know, by the same token!" observed the Irish lad.

"Oh! he's aboard our boat, just now, and will be glad to welcome you," the other party remarked, coolly. "And I hereby invite you

one and all to come along to see for yourselves. It's a mistake all around, I guess. Please accept my invitation in the same friendly spirit in which it is given, and honor us with your company, boys. Josh is getting back to his old self, but he had a nasty tumble, I give you my word."

"What's that?" asked Jack.

"He tripped over a root," said the man, earnestly, "and struck his head on a lump of coquina rock. It made a bad cut on the side of his head, and he bled quite a little. Besides, the blow must have knocked him senseless. My friend Carpenter and myself were just coming back to the boat, after a little side hunt for a deer, when we discovered him lying there, and took him aboard. After he came to, he told us who he was, and all about the rest of you. And am I right in believing that you are Jack Stormways?"

Of course the three boys were more or less thunderstruck by what they had just heard. It knocked all their theories "into flinders," as Jimmy would have said. Here they had been concocting all manner of wonderful stories in connection with the two parties aboard the little power boat. They had even gone so far as to believe the men must be some desperate characters, fleeing from the sheriff,

who might turn up at any hour in full pursuit.

And now, from what the other had just declared, it would seem that the shoe was exactly on the other foot. Instead of proving to be lawless men, criminals in fact, they gave evidence of turning out to be Good Samaritans. Why, Josh might have been in a bad way, only for them, according to what the man had just said.

But could he be believed? Might it not all be a part of some clever trap? George, always inclined toward suspicion, would have held back, had the decision been left to him; Jack was inclined to take the man's word, for he had a frank way about him; while Jimmy was hanging in the balance, hardly knowing what to believe.

Just then there came a shout from within the cabin of the little boat.

"Hello, Jack; it's all right!"

All of them readily recognized the well known voice of Josh; and his assurance went far toward alleviating the fear George entertained, that danger lurked in their putting themselves in the power of the unknown parties.

"You hear what your mate says, Jack?" remarked the man whose figure was outlined against the glow of the cabin's interior. "Tell

them to come aboard, and see what we did for you, Josh."

"That's just what, fellers. Nobody could have been kinder. Don't stop there, but push your way aboard. Cabin's small; but you can all get your heads in," Josh went on to say.

Of course, after that even suspicious George saw no reason for holding back longer. So the three splashed along until they stood hip-deep in the lagoon. The man even stretched out a hand and assisted Jack aboard, as though he bore them not the least bit of malice for having held him up at the muzzle of their guns.

As Jack clambered aboard, the first thing he saw through the opening was Josh, with a bandage around his head, which showed signs of gore, telling that he must have received something of a bad cut when he tripped and fell.

Then all those signs around the spot, which they supposed meant a struggle between the boy and his two captors, had in reality been made when the men attempted to lift Josh, and carry his senseless form to their boat near by.

Well, one thing was apparently explained. There was no longer any mystery as to why Josh had failed to respond when they shouted,

and fired their guns. If at the time, he was lying there senseless, he could not very well be expected to give an answering halloo. But then, why had not these two men done something to let his companions know what had befallen him?

That was what puzzled Jack. He should have thought that the very first thing to occur to them would be to send word to the camp of the motor boat boys—unless, now, there was some good reason for holding back until they could question Josh, and make sure that he did not have any connection with the sheriff and his posse!

"This is my friend, and cruising partner, Mr. Bryce Carpenter," said the one who had thus far been conducting the conversation from their side. "My own name is Sidney Bliss. How about your friends, Jack?"

"George Rollins, the first one, and Jimmy Brannigan the other," Jack immediately spoke. "We've left two more in camp, while we hunted for our lost chum. Hello! Josh; awful glad to find you alive and kicking; but don't like the looks of that bloody pack around your head."

"Huh! I guess I got a pretty hard knock on my coco, all right," grinned Josh; and he did look so comical, with that turban-like

bandage, and his face flecked with little specks of dried blood, that Jimmy burst out into a merry laugh.

"Sure, ye did, Josh, ye spalpeen!" he declared, thrusting one arm into the cabin, so as to clutch the hand of the discovered comrade; "but 'tis a tough nut ye're afther having, I do declare, which is a fortunate thing for ye this night."

"All that he told you is square as a die, fellers," Josh went on. "And they've been mighty kind to me, I give you my word. I didn't know where I was when I came out of the doze; but they asked me a lot of questions, and in that way we got to be right well acquainted."

"H'm! you see," the man who had called himself Sidney Bliss hastened to say, "we had some good reasons for feeling suspicious toward your party, Jack."

"I don't know why," returned the boy, instantly. "We've come all the way down the coast from Philadelphia, and never once bothering ourselves about anybody else's business. George, here, got into rather a little fever because he said you seemed to be watching us through the glasses whenever we happened to come near each other, but it was none of our business, and I wouldn't let it bother me."

That was as plain an invitation for an explanation as could be imagined; and apparently so the other looked at it.

"Well, after learning just who you were, and that you couldn't have the least connection with Lenox and his crowd, we had to laugh at our suspicions," Bliss went on to say.

"We don't happen to know anybody by the name of Lenox, do we, boys?" Jack took occasion to remark.

"Nixy, not," Jimmy asserted, after his usual manner, while George, too, shook his head in the negative.

"Only Lenox I ever knew was a sickly little chap who went to the same boarding school I did about six years ago," he remarked.

"Well, Josh says you're all from out Mississippi way," the man continued, glibly; "and this Lenox is a New Yorker. Besides, he's a man of about forty, and not a boy at all. Belongs to the same club Carpenter and myself do; and thereby hangs the tale that sent us away down here, and made us eye your crowd with suspicion."

"Yes?" Jack said, feeling that he was expected to make some sort of remark.

"They told me all about it, fellers," spoke up Josh; "and after you hear, I guess you'll understand just why they've been playing the

hold-off game they did. It's all as square as you'd want it, take my affidavy on it."

"Good for you, Josh," laughed Bliss, good-naturedly, as he glanced quickly toward his companion; and Jack plainly saw him wink his eye suggestively. "After what we did for you, it's evident that you have perfect faith in our record. But, as I was saying, Jack, at the club one evening, we got to disputing, and Lenox, who pretends to be something of a dashing small boat sailor, dared Bryce and myself to enter into a competition with himself and some of his friends. That's what took us down here right now, you see."

"What sort of competition, sir?" asked George, quickly.

"To prove which party might turn out to be the better sailors, we agreed to make the complete circuit of the coast of Florida in boats no longer than twenty-three feet; and the ones who reached Pensacola first were to be declared winners. Neither of us were to accept the least outside aid, on penalty of being declared losers."

It sounded very nice, and yet Jack could not forget that suggestive look which had passed between the men. And he wondered if there might not be something back of the

story Bliss was telling, something perhaps much nearer the truth.

"Oh!" he remarked, "I see now what you mean. You kept watching us, then, because you suspected we might be your rivals in the race?"

"That's it, Jack," the man immediately burst out with, seemingly pleased; "you see, my boy, our friend Lenox is known to be rather a tricky chap. Carpenter and myself came to the conclusion that he might resort to some scheme to hold us back, and somehow we got to look at your three boats with suspicion. Of course it was all a silly mistake, as we know now. But we're glad to have been of some assistance to your mate, Josh, knowing full well that you'd have done as well by us if the occasion offered. And, by Jove! you boys beat us all hollow, when it comes to bold cruising; for Josh has been telling us something of what you've done. I take off my cap to you, Jack Stormways, as a Corinthian sailor!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN HONOR BOUND.

"Thank you for the compliment," Jack said; "but there are just six of us, all told; and each one is as much entitled to your praise as I am."

"I object," George broke in. "Lots of times the pack of us would have been in a bally lot of hot water only for the clever way you had of handling things."

"And that's no lie, either!" burst out Jimmy. "Whin there's any credit flyin' around loose, sure Jack desarves the lion's share, so he does now."

"Better and better!" cried the man who had given his name as Bliss. "Why, you're as loyal a bunch of chums as I ever ran across. It's a rare treat for my friend Carpenter here and myself to meet up with such fellows, eh, Bryce?"

The way he laid particular emphasis on that name every time he used it somehow gave Jack the impression that he did not wish the other to forget who he was! It was of course a queer feeling to have, but the boy could not get it out of his head.

"How about going back with us, Josh; feel equal to a little walk; or shall I come around after you in a small boat?" Jack asked.

"Rats! what d'ye take me for?" demanded Josh, indignantly. "Just because I've got a little puncture in my noggin is no sign I'm out of the running. Why, course I'll go back with you, and right away, too."

"What's the hurry, boys?" asked Mr. Bliss, quickly.

"Well, for one thing," Jack remarked, "we've got a couple of anxious chums in camp, who'll be eating their heads off with curiosity to know what's become of Josh."

"That's right," declared the tall lad, chuckling; "and it's a shame to keep poor old Nick away from his feed so long. Ten to one he's as hungry as a bear right now, waiting for grub time to come around."

"But won't you stay and have a bite with us?" asked Mr. Carpenter. "We're not extra fine cooks, but we've got lots of good stuff aboard."

"That's right kind of you," George thought he ought to say; "but, considering the circumstances, I reckon we'd better be going, if Josh says he's fit."

"Well, I'll show you I'm feeling just like myself, and not a bit weak, after bleeding like

a stuck pig," and the long-legged boy started to climb out of the cabin as he spoke.

"Please wait a minute," Mr. Bliss interrupted. "If you must go, there's no need of Josh getting himself all wet. You see, we've got it fixed so we can push ashore by a very little effort on our part, right alongside the roots of that tree; and where the water chances to be fairly deep. We had the boat in there when we brought your friend along, and it'll be easy to get back again. Then a jump lands you, safe and sound."

He snatched up a setting pole, the most useful thing that can be carried on a cruise along the shallow waters of the keys, and with very little effort managed to send the anchored boat into the tiny cove, his companion having loosened the anchor cable meanwhile.

Jack was the first to spring ashore, and the others followed quickly at his heels, with Josh bringing up the rear, and anxious to prove his words true about being in first rate condition.

"Glad to have made your acquaintance, boys," said Mr. Bliss; "and if we happen to cross each others' path again, there's no reason why we shouldn't be friends, is there?"

"Well, I should say our chum here is under heavy obligations to you, sir; and on his ac-

count, if no other, we'd feel inclined that way," returned Jack.

"Shake hands on that, Jack," Mr. Bliss remarked; and each of the four boys in turn did so, even carrying the friendly act out with the other skipper of the little power boat.

"The best of luck go with you all!" called out Mr. Bliss, waving his hand after them.

"Same to you, sir!" replied George, who had apparently quite gotten over the suspicions by which he had been almost overpowered earlier in the evening.

And presently, after they had pushed their way across the tongue of land lying between the two lagoons, they could only tell where the boat which they had just left lay, by the glowing light flooding out of her cabin.

Jack placed himself at one side of Josh, while George lined up on the other. But the lanky boy observed these movements with suspicion.

"Hey, what's this mean?" he demanded. "Got an idea I'm apt to keel over any old minute, have you? Just because I did that silly thing once, now don't you think she's goin' to get to be a habit with me. That's a mistake, fellers. I'm tougher'n you reckon on, now. Come along, buck up, George, and hit up a faster pace."

"Hold on, now," said George, as he struggled with a vine that had caught him under the chin, and almost lifted him off his feet; "there ain't any such hurry as all that, you know. It's bad walking here, and I don't feel like being strangled just yet awhile."

"Yes, pull in your horses, Josh," Jack remarked. "We'll believe you're all right without you being in such a rush about getting back to camp."

Three minutes later Jack spoke again.

"None of you noticed that either of those gentlemen came ashore after we left, did you?" he asked, quietly.

"Why, no, of course they didn't," George remarked.

"For what are you askin' that same question?" demanded Jimmy.

"P'raps I might give a guess," remarked Josh, quietly.

"Well, I only wanted to make sure that anything we might say to each other wasn't likely to get to their ears," Jack went on.

"Say, now you've gone and got me guessing good and hard again," remonstrated George. "You seem to just love to say things that sound so mysterious. Tell a fellow, Jack, there's a good chap, why you don't want them to hear us talking. Why, we hadn't ought to have

anything but good words to say about those gentlemen after the fine way they acted toward our chum here."

"That's true enough, George," Jack went on to say; "and make up your mind I'm the last one to look a gift horse in the mouth to find out his age; but there were a few things about our two new friends that somehow made me sit up and take notice; and I wanted to ask Josh here what he thought."

"I just expected you'd be up to that dodge," the party in question observed, with a little chuckle, as of amusement. "I knew that if anybody could get on to their curves, Jack would."

"Curves!" repeated George, wonderingly.

"Sure, he do be thinkin' he's playing baseball again," laughed Jimmy.

"And from the way you talk, Josh," Jack went on, paying no attention to these side remarks on the part of his other chums, "I can give a guess that you must have made some little discovery on your own hook that has told you our two friends might be playing a little game of blindman's buff with us right now. How is that, Josh?"

"Jack, you're the greatest feller I ever struck, to get on to anything," replied the long-legged one, admiringly.

"That isn't answering my question," the other continued.

"Then I'll say, yes," Josh went on.

"Tell us what it was you heard," George asked, once more fairly boiling with a desire to know everything connected with the mysterious passengers of the little power boat that had acted so strangely on the trip down the east coast.

"Hold on a minute," said Josh. "This bandage is slipping down, so I'll have to get you to fix it for me, boys. Hope the hole's leaked all it's going to, because I can't afford to lose as much fluid as some fellers, Nick for instance. There, that feels all right. Now, what was you saying to me? Oh! yes, about how I happened to get onto the fact that the two gentlemen that took me aboard their boat might be somethin' else besides what they said. Was that it?"

"Just what it was!" George came back, knowing how Josh always liked to beat about the bush more or less before telling anything he knew.

"Well, here's the way it stands, fellers," went on Josh. "You see, after they carried me on board the boat, I laid there like a mummy in a trance. But by slow degrees I began to come back again. And all the while

my eyes must have been shut, I could hear some mumbling voices, though for the life of me I couldn't make out who it was talkin'."

"Oh! hurry up, old ice-wagon; get a move on you, and tell us!" exclaimed George, almost biting his tongue with impatience.

"I heard one man that I afterwards knew was Mr. Bliss say, as plain as anything: 'I tell you, they're nothin' but boys, and they ain't goin' to give us away.' And then the other one, he says, says he: 'If I thought this one knew anything, I'd be tempted to let him lie there where we picked him up, that's what. We can't afford to take any chances, and you know it, Sam!' "

Jack gave a low whistle.

"And yet Mr. Bliss said his friend's name was Bryce Carpenter," he observed. "I had an idea all along, from the way he called that name, he wasn't used to saying it. Sam came easier to his tongue. Now, we don't know who Sam is, or what he's done, but seems to me there's something crooked about that yarn they set up, of a wager made with that Lenox fellow."

"They never made such a wager," declared Josh, stubbornly; "and right now the only thing they want to do is to get around to Tampa, where they expect to slip aboard a

boat bound for Cuba. I heard some more talk before I opened my eyes and spoiled it all. If the one who calls himself Carpenter hadn't got cold feet, their plan was to drop down the keys to Key West, and get across to Havana from there."

"Well, what's that to us?" remarked Jack. "They treated you white, Josh, didn't they?"

"They sure did," answered the other, warmly.

"All right," Jack went on; then it's no business of ours who and what they are; and we'll just have to forget them. But, listen, wasn't that a shout ahead, there?"

CHAPTER XII.

AN INVASION OF THE CAMP.

"I heard it, too, Jack!" exclaimed George; but neither of the others seemed to have noticed anything, though in the case of Josh, with his head tied up, this was really not to be wondered at.

"What sort of a sound was it, boys?" demanded the tall one.

"I thought it was a shout of some kind; how about it, George?" Jack replied.

"Same here. But then, perhaps its only Herb and Nick skylarking. Once in so often Nick gets a streak, and thinks he has to work off his high humor. But see here, Jack, I hope you don't imagine some sort of trouble has dropped in on the two boys we left in camp less than an hour back?"

"Well, I don't know," Jack made answer, in a half-hesitating way. "But somehow it struck me that yell was more along the line of anger or fright than the result of high spirits or kidding."

"But Jack, we don't hear any more of the same sort?" George remonstrated.

"How's that, then?" asked the other, as a plain whoop came faintly to their ears.

"Say, that's Nick, all right," Josh declared, stoutly. "I could tell his shout among a thousand. There never was one like it. I always said a wild Injun from the Crow reservation couldn't begin to hold a candle to Nick, when it came to letting out a whoop."

"But what would make him give tongue that way?" asked George, as he pushed on at the heels of the leader; for they were now following what seemed to be a trail through the undergrowth, where the trees grew sparingly.

"Troth, and I hope now, nothing has happened to Herb," Jimmy remarked.

"Oh! let up guessing that way. Whatever could happen to either of them, tell me that?" George demanded. "We left the boys safe in camp; and they even said they believed they'd go aboard one of the boats, although making sure to keep the fire going, so we would see it, if we got mixed in our bearings, while skirting the short line. Maybe you'd expect an alligator to crawl in from the swamp, and try to make a meal off our chums?"

"Well, why not?" demanded Josh. "I reckon, now, they have just such reptiles in this region, don't they, great big fellers, too,

some call them crocodiles, I'm told. But there, Nick tunes up again, like a good feller."

"There must be something wrong, or he wouldn't show so much excitement. Make all the hurry you can, boys. We're getting closer all the time; yes, and it seems to me I can almost make out what he's shouting."

"You're right, Jack, for I'd take my affidavy I heard him say just then: 'Get out, you robber! skedaddle, now!' "

"That sounds like some one had found the camp, and was trying to steal our belongings!" George exclaimed.

"Well, I hope they lave the boats, that's all; for the walkin' do be harrd, I'm tould, between here and Meyers," Jimmy up and said, in his whimsical way.

"Good gracious! you don't think, now, that anybody would be so mean as to try and crib our bully boats?" gasped George; and no matter what oceans of trouble his *Wireless* may have given him in the past, all was forgiven now, when danger lurked over the motor boat flotilla.

"Come along!" called Jack, over his shoulder; "the quickest way to find out what it all means, is to get there. Hit it up a little swifter, all of you! Put your best foot forward, and run!"

They accordingly did so. What mattered it if occasionally one of them did happen to trip, and come down with a hard thump; it was only a question of a few seconds for the unlucky one to scramble to his feet, and a few bruises more or less surely did not count.

In this fashion, then, they covered the remainder of the ground that lay between the camp and themselves.

Jack, being in the lead, was the first to glimpse what was going on. He held up a warning arm to head off the impetuous rush of his mates; and as they could plainly see his figure outlined against the bright background of the fire-lighted zone, George and Josh and Jimmy all drew up alongside the leader.

No one said anything. They were too busily engaged taking it all in, to express themselves in any way. And, indeed, it was a sight well worth observing, one that would return to them many a time, and always cause a smile to creep across each boy's face.

For it was more humorous than tragical, though possibly one of the actors in the affair looked upon it in the light of a serious proposition.

First, there was Herb aboard the good old *Comfort,* and engaged in waving the ax, upon which he seemed to lay considerable depend-

ence. He appeared to be defying some enemy, and promising all sorts of dire things if so be the boat was boarded.

But Nick's clarion voice was proceeding from a higher place; in fact, it seemed to ooze forth from the branches of a small tree that happened to grow not far from where the camp-fire had been started.

A look upward disclosed the fat boy, perched among the branches of the said tree. He varied his outcries by waving the shotgun, which seemed to be utterly useless in so far as discharging it was concerned.

There was a black bunch of hair busily engaged in trying to tear open some of the provisions that the fat boy had "toted" ashore, in his desire to get supper started. It was, in truth, a bear, a hungry animal that had declined to gorge himself upon the remains of the jewfish, when other and greater delicacies were within reach.

It was breaking the heart of poor Nick to see this vandal threatening to dispose of all their precious food, so that they must go on scant rations the rest of the way to Naples or Meyers. No wonder that the hungry Nick whooped and yelled, calling the black pirate by all the hard names he could think up.

Now and then the animal would appear to

be disturbed by all this racket. On such occasions he would shuffle over to the sapling in which the fat boy was perched, raising his snout to sniff the air, as though half tempted to make the climb, and punish his detractor as seemed most fitting.

Nick evidently became fearful each time that he was going to be in for it. He would howl worse than ever, and make all sorts of dreadful threats as to what he might do in case such a thing happened.

"Oh! ain't you the lucky thing, though?" he bellowed, just as the others ranged up to take the whole picture in. "If I hadn't been silly enough to go ashore, carrying Herb's old gun, and forget to put any shells in the same, I guess you'd be a dead bear right now, old top! Here, quit shaking this tree, won't you? Think you own the whole ranch? Reckon other people got some right to live. Just go back to your jewfish dinner, and all may be forgiven; but you let our crackers and cheese and bacon and hominy alone, hear that? Wow! there, he's gone and busted the hominy sack! Look at the gump wasting all that fine food, would you? Herb, can't you *please* get some of those bully old shells over to me somehow? I'd give a heap to tickle him between the sixth and seventh ribs, sure I would!"

Just then Jack gave a peculiar little whistle. Nick heard it, and immediately "perked up his ears," as Josh called it. He could be seen to twist his head around, and try to locate the one who had given the well known signal.

"Hey, Jack! wherever are you?" he called, in perplexity.

Jack did not dare make any reply. He had seen the bear start at the sound of the signal whistle, just as if the sly beast understood that it must surely spell danger for one of his type.

"Get ready to back me up, George, Jimmy!" Jack whispered.

They understood that since Jack carried the repeating rifle, it ought to be his duty to fire first. Should he make a failure, then they could come in, to try and load the marauding bear with all the lead possible. If, after all, the beast managed to get away, he would at least surely carry the marks of the warm engagement with him the rest of his natural life.

By this time both Herb and Nick had discovered what was going on, and, naturally enough, they were deeply interested.

"Give him Hail Columbia, Jack!" called Herb, waving his ax above his head, as he stood there on the deck of the gallant old *Comfort,*

looking as though ready to hurl defiance at all the bears in South Florida.

"Oh! be sure and pot him, Jack!" cried Nick, entreatingly. "I always wanted to see what real bear steak tasted like. And honest now, I reckon it'll be sweeter because the old villain ran me up this tree. Get a bead on him, and make dead sure of your aim. Don't I wish I had some buckshot shells up here? Wouldn't I have enjoyed peppering him, though. Wow! give him another for his mother, Jack!"

Jack had waited until the bear turned, so as to expose his side. It was his desire to send the bullet so that it would strike just back of the foreleg, because he had always been told that that was the most vulnerable spot in which to hit any large animal.

When the opportunity came he sent in his card. Instantly there arose a tremendous commotion. The bear sent out a series of roars and whirled around, to fall down, and then struggle to its feet again, while Nick shouted in his excitement, and the other fellows added their voices to his chorus.

Jack coolly pumped another cartridge into the firing chamber of his repeating rifle, and stood ready to make a second try, if he found reason to believe such action were needed.

It was quickly proven to his satisfaction that nothing of the kind was required. The bear soon toppled over again, and from the way in which the poor animal kicked it was plain to be seen that the last stage had come.

"Bully! we're going to have bear steaks all right!" laughed the pleased Nick; and then he added: "Say, Jack, do you really believe the old sinner's kicked the bucket, or is he playing a little game to coax me down? I'm sore from hanging up here so long. Give him a punch and see if he moves, George. My gracious! what ails Josh, and where'd he get that night-cap he's wearing?"—and, overcome by curiosity, the fat boy came sliding down the bending sapling, to land in a heap at its foot.

Herb too came ashore, filled with wonder, and eager to hear the story, which was told as they stood around the body of the bear that had invaded the camp, and sent Nick in hot haste "shinning" up a tree.

CHAPTER XIII.

JIMMY REFUSES TO GIVE UP THP GAME.

They were now fully in the great Gulf of Mexico, and headed for Tampa. Nick had been able to enjoy bear steak to his heart's content. The others pronounced the meat pretty dry, and poor eating; but when served in the shape of a stew, or hash, it answered the purpose. There was a whole lot, they decided, in knowing that it *was* the genuine article. Otherwise most of them would have declined to eat it, just as they would tough beef.

"Jack, is it true that there are ten thousand of these mangrove islands?"

"Well, you've got me there, Josh," laughed the leader of the little expedition, as, several days after the adventure with the bear, the three motor boats glided in and out among the queer collection of islets that marks the southwestern coast of Florida.

"But that's what they're called on the map," insisted Josh.

"Oh! you don't suppose for a minute anybody in the wide world could ever count these mud flats, covered with the everlasting mangrove, do you?" Jack went on. "A few hun-

dred, or even thousand more or less, wouldn't matter."

"For my part," spoke up George, "there are just nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine too many. I could be satisfied with one island. Why, for two days now, we've been going in and out of these bally old bunches of mangroves, dodging storms, and fighting skeeters to beat the band."

"You'd better be thankful," declared Herb, "that after you led us in a trap, Jack took us out again, George. Only for him we might be lost right now, miles deep in these everlasting tangles. You notice that now we never get far away from a sight of the big water, don't you? It seems a dangerous business for a small boat cruiser to wander into this nest down here. He's apt to lose his head, and never come out again."

"Do we pull up soon, Jack?" asked Jimmy, beseechingly.

"Why, yes, as the afternoon is going," Jack replied; and then, as if noticing the eagerness plainly marked upon his shipmate's freckled face, he went on: "But what's in the wind with you, Jimmy? I can see that you're thinking of some stunt."

Jimmy laughed at that. The three boats were moving slowly on, close together, and he

could easily send a significant look toward the complacent Nick.

"Oh, I know what ails him, all right!" cried the fat boy.

"Then suppose you tell us, Nick?" George demanded.

"Jimmy's got an idea in his head that he's going to knock my record for big fish all hollow, and this place strikes him as likely to pan out well. Haven't I seen him watching those big tarpon jumping this very afternoon? I just bet you he means to make a try for one of them, as soon as we anchor for the night," and Nick completed his assertion with a chuckle.

"And have ye any objection to my makin' a thry, tell me that?" Jimmy demanded.

"Sure not," Nick immediately replied; "only you're bound to have all the trouble for your pains, Jimmy boy."

"Ye think that way?" asked the other, suspiciously.

"Oh, for a lot of reasons!" came from the complacent Nick, ready to rest upon his honors. "First off, you'd have to fish in one of our little dinkies; and a tarpon is such a powerful fish, it'd drag you miles and miles before giving up. Remember, you're not allowed the least help to land the game."

Jimmy shook his head, and watched his rival from under his heavy eyebrows.

"Secondly," continued the fat boy, airily, "the biggest tarpon ever captured never weighed as much as two hundred pounds, remember that, Jimmy. Jack, would you mind stating what we decided the weight of my jew-fish was?"

"We agreed on two hundred and thirty as about the right thing," came the reply.

"There you are, Jimmy," mocked Nick. "Better forget all about tarpon, and turn your attention to, say, whales."

"But, by the same token, they towld me whales never come this far south, and so I'll never get square with ye that way," grumbled Jimmy. "But never mind, me bhoy, sooner or later you'll meet up with defate. I'm still studying the way I'm bound to bring ye to a Waterloo. The Brannigans never gave up, rimimber. When ye laste expect it ye'll be overwhelmed."

"Oh, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. And while you're worrying that poor head of yours, Jimmy, about the ways and means of capturing a three hundred pounder, I'm just going to keep on feasting on these fine oysters we've been picking up right along. Yum! yum! how I do love 'em, though!"

"Yes, we happen to know that," remarked Josh. "Fact is, we've heard you make the same remark ever since we set out from Philadelphia on this cruise."

"And if a fellow could see the piles of oysters Nick's gobbled since that day, he'd be just staggered, that's what!" George put in, sarcastically; for, as the fat boy sailed in his company, the skipper of the *Wireless* doubtless grew very weary of hearing constant reminders concerning feasts, past and to come.

"Well," sang out Jack just then, "I don't see any reason why we shouldn't pull up here as well as anywhere. Good anchorage, with a chance for a breath of wind off the gulf tonight, that may keep the savage little key mosquitoes fairly quiet. What say, fellows?"

As they were all of a mind, the halt was quickly brought about. They anchored in the open; but in case of a sudden high wind arising that threatened to make things unpleasant for the small craft, it would be the easiest thing in the world to push around in the lee of the nearest mangrove island, which would serve as a barrier against the storm.

Jimmy was soon seen paddling away in the dinky belonging to the speed boat.

"Now what did he take your rifle for, Jack, if he expects to go fishing?" asked George,

while Nick cocked up his ears, and listened as though interested.

"I asked him, and he only grinned at me," Jack replied. "But I made him promise not to go beyond that big island you can see up the channel a ways."

A short time later they heard a shot, followed by several others, that made them sit up and take notice.

"Say, he got a crack at something!" Nick remarked, uneasily, for he remembered how Jimmy had looked so queerly at him when departing, as though he had something in his mind.

"Well, we'll soon know; and I can see him moving around in his boat up yonder right now. Seems to me he's trying to get at something in among the mangroves. He must have made a kill of it," Herb declared.

Ten minutes later and Jimmy was seen approaching, rowing steadily.

"Look at him, would you?" called out the anxious Nick; "he's dragging something behind the boat, as sure as anything!"

Jack watched the performance for a minute or so, and then remarked:

"Looks to me like a big 'gator; and that's what it is, boys."

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Nick, bouncing up;

"I wonder now does the silly believe an alligator would count against my fish? Jack, I appeal to you to give him the law as she's written in our compact."

But Jack refused to say anything prematurely.

"Wait till he makes his claim," he replied, with a laugh, as he watched the sturdy labors of the Irish lad to rejoin them.

When Jimmy did arrive they saw that he had indeed managed to shoot an unusually large mossback 'gator, which he had possibly discovered sunning itself among the mangroves. As a rule the creatures prefer the fresh water, but may on occasion be found where there is a commingling of salt and fresh.

The exultant captor was grinning, as if hugely pleased. He nodded his head in the direction of the staring Nick, as he finally came alongside. Then they saw that he had been wise enough to take a rope along with him, which had been hitched around the body of the slain monster, just back of the short forelegs. Nevertheless, it had taken considerable of an effort to drag the saurian all the way from the place of the tragedy to where the three motor boats were anchored.

Jimmy wiped the perspiration from his red face, as he exultantly cried out:

"By the powers, can ye bate that, I'd loike to know, so I would? Two hundred and thirty, did ye till me; sure this one must weight all of twict that. I lave it to the umpire here to decide, contint to rest on me laurels."

Nick began to show signs of tremendous excitement at once.

"How about that, Jack?" he pleaded. "He went and shot it with the rifle, don't you know? I don't call that fishing, now, do you?"

"I've heard of people who shoot fish with a rifle, lots of times," commented Herb, just to excite Nick a little more.

"Yes, but don't tell me an alligator is a fish!" exclaimed Nick, in great disgust. "Why, when I was in the lower grade in school they taught us to call it just a *rep-tile!*"

At that a shout went up from the balance of the voyagers.

"You'll have to settle this right on the spot, Jack," declared George.

"Get out the articles of war and read what it says; that's the only fair way," remarked Herb.

So Jack deliberately took out his notebook, and in a sing-song tone, assumed for the purpose, read as he had done once before at Jimmy's request:

" 'Each contestant shall have the liberty of

fishing as often as he pleases, and the fish may be taken in any sort of manner—the one stipulation being that the capture shall be undertaken by the contestant alone and unaided; and that he must have possession of the fish long enough to show the same, and have its weight either estimated or proven.' "

"Well, here it is before ye, and riddy to be weighed!" said Jimmy, stoutly.

"But Jack, what do you say, *is* an alligator a fish in the true sense of the word?" demanded Nick, stubbornly.

"As the umpire in this dispute," said Jack, solemnly, "I am forced to disallow the claim Jimmy makes. No matter how he got his prize, we can't swallow what he says about an alligator being a fish, even if it does swim under water; for it couldn't live there at all, but has to come up on shore. So Jimmy, you'll have to try again; and better luck to you next time!"

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN THE COMFORT WAS HUNG UP.

Evidently Jimmy was not at all dismayed by his present setback. As he said, he sprang from stock that would never acknowledge defeat.

"Just wait, me laddybuck," he declared, as he shook his finger at the grinning Nick; "the day is long yit, and by the powers, they be other ways of beating that record ye've hung up. I'll kape me eyes about me, to say if another jewfish wouldn't be afther stranding himself for me 'special benefit. And who knows but what this toime it may be a three hundred pounder I'll be lugging into camp."

"Oh, that's all right, Jimmy," remarked the fat boy, apparently not very much worried over the possibility of losing his laurels; "but make sure of one thing before you claim the earth."

"And what moight that be?" demanded Jimmy, innocently.

"Why, don't shout till you see whether it's a fish—*or a log!*" and Nick lay back on the soft cushions he had brought on deck for his

own comfort, to laugh uproariously at his remark.

Jimmy turned a bit red, but joined in the general hilarity; for he was able to enjoy a joke, even at his own expense.

Some days before, while Jimmy was fishing very industriously, he had given a yell, and was seen to be pulling at a tremendous rate at something to which his hook had evidently become attached.

Of course his rival had shown great interest in his actions, for it looked as if the Irish lad must have hooked a monster of a fish. But when finally Jimmy was able, alone and unaided, to bring the thing to the surface, he discovered, much to his chagrin, that it was only a sunken and waterlogged log. His own frantic labor had given it all the wonderful movements which he believed were the struggles of a captured fish.

"But I say, Jack, darlint," went on the Irish boy, "before I make another thry, plase tell me this: Suppose now, ye should say me comin' back, and ridin' on a manatee that they do be havin' around here—would ye call that a fish, becase it lives, so they tell me, under the wather all the toime?"

He glared triumphantly at Nick, whose

mouth opened in sheer amazement upon hearing the audacious proposition.

"If he don't take the cake for trying to do the queerest things, now!" the fat boy exclaimed. "Why, it's just silly to think of him capturing a manatee, and harnessing it, like they say Father Neptune does the dolphins. And Jack, looky here, a manatee can't be a fish at all, any more than an alligator is."

"Tell me why?" demanded Jimmy, pugnaciously. "Sure, it's amphibious it do be, and lives under the water all the toime. I think I've got ye there, Nick, me bhoy."

"But listen," Nick continued, with conviction in his manner, "haven't you heard it called a sea cow; and can a cow be a fish, Jack?" with which he turned triumphantly toward the laughing umpire.

"Now, what's the matter with a cow-whale?" asked Jimmy; "and yet deny that a whale is a fish if ye dare?"

"Jack, settle that, won't you, before he goes and brings in every old varmint to be found in this region?" pleaded Nick.

But Jack was too wise. He did not want to shut out the possibility of their having the time of their lives, should the energetic and ambitious Jimmy attempt to carry his plans into effect.

"No, I'm not going to bother my head over things that may never happen," he declared; and with that Jimmy paddled away in the little dinky, grinning broadly at the uneasy Nick.

"Nobody just knows what that fellow *will* do next," muttered the fat boy, as he followed his retreating rival with his eyes.

Meanwhile Jack was taking a look around with his glasses.

"Somehow I don't altogether like this place after we've anchored," he remarked.

"And why?" inquired Herb.

"For one thing," Jack continued, "it's more exposed than would be pleasant, if one of those Northers we've been hearing so much about should spring up in the night. And I've been watching those ibis and cranes flying over for some time now. They all head in one quarter, and from that I reckon there's a bird roost over yonder."

Herb pricked up his ears, for he had long since expressed a desire to look in on a real roosting place, where all kinds of birds came together each night.

"I tell you, Jack," he remarked, eagerly, "let's change our anchorage, and head that way. It can't be more than a mile or so further in, d'ye think?"

"Not more than that," was the reply.

"But we don't want to get lost among these blooming islands!" said George.

"We could make some sort of mark as we go, to leave a trail, and it would be easy to come out the same way," was Jack's sensible suggestion.

"But how about Jimmy; if he came back here, and found us gone, there would be a howl, believe me?" Nick observed.

"It happens by good luck that he's headed in just the right direction, so I could pick him up on the way," Jack declared.

"And that would wind up his fishing for today, wouldn't it?" asked Nick.

"It surely would," was the reply of the *Tramp's* skipper; whereupon the fat boy heaved an audible sigh of gratification.

"Then I vote in favor of doing what Jack says, and having a peep in at the bird colony tonight, if we can," he remarked.

"We might as well, I suppose," Josh put in, being somewhat curious himself with regard to what such a roost looked like.

"I say this," continued Jack, who thought his sudden desire to change their anchorage needed further explanation, "because I understand that these roosts, once so plentiful in Southern Florida, are hard to find nowadays;

and we might not have another chance to see the sight."

"What happens to make 'em scarce?" asked Josh.

"Oh, well! the main thing has been that plume hunters have found them out, and murdered the birds by the thousands. It's worse when they hunt out the nesting places of the herons, and kill the mother birds, just to get the aigrette, which, it happens, is always at its best about the time the birds have young."

"Say, I've read a lot about that," mentioned George; "and they tell us that it's the most dreadful thing to visit one of those nesting places in the swamp after the plume hunters have been at their bloody work. Thousands of young birds are starving in the nests, and the sounds they put up just haunt a fellow forever."

"None of that in mine," declared tender-hearted Nick, firmly.

"I guess we all say the same," Jack added; "but when our intention is only to see what such a place looks like, nobody can blame us for going."

"I should hope not," said George. "But do we get up our mudhooks right now, Jack, and mosey out of this nook?"

"That's the programme, and here goes for

my anchor. Whew! it's stuck fast in the mud, all right. Give me a lift, Josh, after you and Herb have pulled yours up on deck," and inside of five minutes all of them had washed the mud from the forked anchors, which were then placed conveniently on the forward deck, where they could be dropped overboard with a push.

Then the boats moved off.

This time it was the steady going old *Comfort* that took the lead—Jack being in no particular hurry and George, as usual, being compelled to tamper with his eccentric motor, before he could get it to going right.

Of course Herb meant to fall back presently, and let the *Tramp* take the lead; but it was really so seldom that he had a chance to leave the others in the lurch that he and Josh seemed to enjoy running away.

Jack, of course, was on the lookout for the first sign of his teammate. Jimmy was discovered rowing frantically around one end of the big island, as though, upon hearing the popping of exhausts, he had been seized with a sudden fear lest he was in danger of being abandoned there in that terrible region, with not a foot of high land within many miles.

"Hi! howld on there, Jack darlint!" he

called out, stopping to wave a hand toward the advancing *Tramp.*

When alongside he of course demanded to know what it all meant; and upon learning that they were about to go a mile or so further in, Jimmy shook his head in a discouraged manner, saying:

"Arrah! now, as if I couldn't say through a stone that has a hole in the same. I do be belaving that it's all the fault of that same sly one, Nick. He's that fearful of me accomplishin' me threat, and securin' a whopper of a fish, that he invents all sorts of rasons for being on the jump. But I'll get the better of him yet, say if I don't, Jack, me bhoy!"

He climbed aboard, still grumbling, as though unable to convince himself that this was not all some smart scheme, engineered by his rival, in order to keep him from securing a prize catch.

Herb was still far ahead, and skirting some of the many islands. When he reached a certain point he had marked out for himself, he intended to lie to, and wait for the coming of Jack. George had started on at a fast gait, and doubtless was determined to head off the clumsy *Comfort,* which fact may have urged Herb to do his best and cut corners sharply. All of which led up to a sequel.

Jack suddenly missed the loud noise that usually accompanied the progress of the broad-beamed boat. As he looked up he discovered that George was heading straight for the *Comfort,* which hung near the point of an island; also that both Herb and Josh were jumping wildly about, as though greatly excited.

"What do be the matter with the gossoons?" asked Jimmy.

"I don't know for certain," replied Jack; "but I've got my suspicions. Herb was running in a careless way and just as like as not he managed to snag his boat. If that's what happened, we're in for a peck of trouble; for there's no boat builder within many miles of this place, and we'd be lucky to find even a piece of shore to pull her up on."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BIRD ROOST.

"Sure, it's just like ye say, Jack!" exclaimed Jimmy, while they were hurrying toward the imperiled boat at full speed. "They do be throwin' wather out to beat bannigher. Josh has got a bucket and Herb handles a basin. Glory be! but this is a bad job all around!"

Jack was looking beyond the sinking boat.

"I think I can see a little bit of a shore just over there," he declared, "if only now we can drag the *Comfort* there before she goes down. You jump aboard with this bucket as soon as we get there. She looks lower in the water already, but one more hand to toss it out may keep her afloat long enough."

Jimmy was more than eager to lend all the assistance in his power. No sooner had the *Tramp* run alongside the other boat than he was over the side. Nick, too, had been given the same instructions by George, for he was already laboring with might and main to reduce the amount of water that persisted in entering the big boat through the hole knocked in her bottom by a stump or a submerged log.

"Here, George, lay close alongside, and let's get fast to her!" Jack called out, realizing that heroic measures were all that would save the imperiled craft now.

Quickly they carried out the plan. Ropes were passed back and forth, so that the *Comfort* could not really sink, with two such staunch boats buoying her up.

"Now," continued Jack, when this had been accomplished, "start your engine slowly and we'll try and beach her over yonder. By the greatest of good luck there's a small patch of ground in sight, different from these mud banks. Ready, George?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"Then go ahead!"

Jack held back until he heard the puttering of the *Wireless* exhaust; then he also started his engine, and the three boats moved slowly and majestically off, the *Comfort* looking, as Josh expressed it, like a wounded duck sustained by the wings of two companions.

Those aboard the sinking craft had to keep up their work in a frantic manner, if they did not want the boat to go down under them in midstream. Now and then one would make a bad shot, and spill the contents of bucket or basin over the forms of his fellow laborers. But although this might have seemed comical

to Nick or Josh or Jimmy at another time, they failed to laugh now, even when struck full in the face by a deluge, and half choked.

Fortunately the other island, where the little patch of rising ground had been discovered by Jack, was close at hand, so that in less than ten minutes they had arrived as near as they dared go.

"Now, I'm going to break loose and get behind," said Jack. "If I can shove her further in, it'll be all right, for then she won't sink any lower. In the morning we can get the block and tackle, and drag her out on skids."

The workers were encouraged to keep at it furiously for another minute or two, while the *Tramp* did the shoving part. Knowing just how to go about it, Jack made a success of his part of the business.

"Hurrah!" gasped Nick, when the keel grated on the bottom, and the weary water-casters could rest from their labors.

But there was a lot more to do. The bedding and stores that were aboard had to be rescued, and placed where they might have a chance to dry. It took some little time to get all the stuff out; and then Jack had another idea.

"Perhaps I might shove her up still further,

if you fellows went ashore," he suggested; which they declared to be a good thing.

"After all," said Jack, when he had actually succeeded in pushing the stranded *Comfort* a foot or so further in, "what does it matter? We'll have to make a couple of skids tomorrow, and get a purchase on some of the mangroves yonder; when we can yank her up, no matter where she is. And now I vote that we get ashore, and see about starting supper. I'm as hungry as a bear."

"Hear! hear!" applauded Nick. "And while I'm about it, I guess I had ought to change my shoes and socks, because I'm wet to the knees; fact is, I'm pretty well soaked all over. Josh kept emptying his old pail over me right along. I guess I swallowed as much of the salt stuff as he got over the side."

However, by the time night had set in, the boys were all feeling in a better humor. Those who were wet had changed some of their things, and dried the rest beside the fire that was burning cheerily.

"What do you think of it, Jack?" asked Herbert, after the other had made as good an examination of the hole in the bottom of the wrecked motor boat as the circumstances permitted.

"It's a clean hole, all right," was the re-

sponse, "but I don't see any reason why we can't patch it up to last until we get to a boat builder's yard."

"I'm right glad to hear you say that," continued the anxious skipper, "because, as you all know, I'm mighty fond of my boat, and would hate like everything to have to abandon the poor old thing in this place. So now I can eat some supper with a touch of appetite."

At any rate it was pleasant to again stretch their legs, after being confined to the boats for several days. And Josh seemed to have enjoyed cooking a full meal once more for the crowd.

"Now, how about that roost; do you suppose we can find it from here?" George asked, when they were about through.

"If you still feel like going, I think it won't be a hard thing," Jack declared.

"Count me out, please," Nick remarked, "I don't believe I care enough about it; and, besides, somebody ought to stay here, to keep the fire going, so you can tell where to come back."

"Huh! he's clean filled up to the top, that's what," remarked Josh; "and when Nick gets that way, you just can't coax him to budge an inch. But I'm with you, boys."

It was presently decided that all the others would go in the three tenders. As Nick was

given a shotgun, this time fully loaded, and ready for business, he expressed himself as willing to stand guard.

"Anyhow," he observed, with a wide smile, "I don't reckon on having any bear for a visitor this time. He couldn't get on this island, could he, Jack?"

"Not in a thousand years," was the reassuring reply.

"And you can stay aboard the *Tramp* until we come back," George went on to say. "Only don't let that fire go out a minute, or perhaps you'll be minus all your chums. A nice time you'd have here, all alone, wouldn't you? Why, you'd starve to death before long with that appetite of yours, Nick."

"Shucks! there ain't much danger of your getting lost while Jack's along. If it depended on you, George, I'd be scared right bad now," the fat boy got back at him as the party moved away.

They took the lighted lantern with them, and expected to be very cautious how they managed, not wanting to lose their bearings in the darkness. Jack had made a mental map of the vicinity, and behind that he could find his way back to where the fire showed.

He led off, paddling with one of the oars,

for when the little dinky held two these could not be used in the ordinary fashion.

And it was not very long before the others knew that again Jack had shown more than ordinary skill, for they reached an island where, from the sounds, it was evident that the roost of the birds could be found.

Landing, they made their way over the exposed roots of mangroves and cypress trees, gradually drawing near the middle of the island. And here they found what they sought.

Jack made several torches out of some wood he found, and when these were lighted they saw a sight that none of them would soon forget. Thousands of birds were in the trees, many of them herons, ibis, cranes and water turkeys.

For some time the boys looked at the spectacle. Then, tiring of it, as well as objecting to the anything but pleasant odor of the roost, which had long been in use they imagined, they retreated again to the boats, after which the return trip was begun.

Nick had kept the fire going, and little trouble was experienced getting back to where the larger craft awaited them.

The night passed quietly and with the morn-

ing they began to make preparations looking to the repairing of the snagged *Comfort.*

Breakfast over, Jack set out with the ax, and Josh to help him, taking two of the small boats. When he found a couple of cypress trees that he thought would answer the purpose, over on Bird Island, as they had named the place of the roost, he cut them down, and by hard work they towed the intended skids to camp.

Here they were shaped, and placed in position. Then the block and tackle, which had been carried on board the roomy *Comfort,* were brought into play.

Jack selected the strongest mangrove within line of the boat that was to be hauled out, when fastening the tackle.

"Here you are, now, fellows!" he declared, when all was ready.

"Come along, everybody, and take a grip on the rope," invited Herb, who was more than anxious to get busy at the job of patching the smashed sheathing of his boat, so they could continue their voyage.

Even Nick was made to lend the power of his muscles to the good work.

"If we could only get the full force of his weight, she'd come with a rush," Josh had de-

clared, though the fat boy only noticed the slur with a smile and a nod.

"Are you all ready to pull?" asked Jack, who, being master of ceremonies, had the leading position on the line.

"Sure we are; get busy, Jack, darlint!" sang out Jimmy.

"Then altogether now, and away we go!—one, two, three! She moved that time, fellows, I tell you. Once more now, yo-heave-o! That was worth talking about, and she jumped six inches. Again, and put every ounce of muscle into it! Now, then, up with her! Another turn! That's the way to do it, boys!" And Jack continued to encourage his mates to do their level best until they had dragged the *Comfort* up the skids to a point where one could crawl underneath her exposed keel.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SCREECHER FROM THE NORTH.

All of them awaited the verdict with bated breath. Jack was down on his back under the boat, and carefully examining the fracture made by the snag.

"We can mend it, all right," he announced, as he finally snaked his way out.

A chorus of approval greeted the announcement.

"How long will it take us, do you think?" asked Herb, who looked relieved to know that, after all, his boat would not be lost.

"Oh! that depends. Perhaps by tonight it may be in apple-pie shape, good enough to hold out till we get to Tampa," Jack replied.

"Say, looks like we might have the whole bally armada in the hands of the ship joiners at the same time," chuckled Nick. "Because, you know, George and me want to get a new engine installed the worst kind, don't we, George?"

The skipper of the *Wireless* grunted in reply; Nick was evidently running things now with regard to that change in motive power,

and did not mean to let his mate draw back from his word.

"But first of all, we've got to drag the boat up further," continued Jack. "You see, if I've got to work at that broken place for hours, I'm bound to have it more comfortable than now. Lying on my back would knock me out."

Accordingly they all took hold again, after the tackle had been shifted. It was not so difficult a thing to do, with six sturdy fellows to pull a rope; and presently the *Comfort* was elevated at a point that would allow one to kneel under her keel.

Jack made his preparations, and set to work. With the willing Herb to assist in any way necessary, the others of course were not needed.

Josh amused himself after his favorite manner, studying up some new dishes with which he figured surprising his chums some fine day. George could always find plenty to do puttering with his engine, and trying to cure its faults; for hope dies hard in the young and sanguine heart.

Jimmy and Nick took to fishing, because that employment seemed to engross their every waking thought. When Jimmy started out, the fat boy grew uneasy; and before long

he, too, paddled away in one of the small tenders.

"Be sure and don't go out of sight of the smoke from the fire," Jack had cautioned them both; and Josh agreed to make use of some pine wood he had picked up, in order to create a black smoke; for Florida pine is full of the resinous sap that burns fiercely, and makes a dense smudge.

Jimmy did not remain long in one place. He seemed very restless, as though he wanted to move about, in order to be on the lookout for a chance to make a grand haul. Nick followed from time to time, meaning to be an eyewitness to any remarkable event that took place.

"He's hoping to get fast to one of them tarpon, that's what," was the conviction of the fat youth, who had discovered that the king fish of the coast was in evidence in those warm waters. "I just wish he would right now," he went on, chuckling; "I'd give a whole heap to see Jimmy pulled around by one of them high skippers of tarpon. It'd curb that ambition of his, some, I guess now."

And, singular to say, Nick's wish was fated to be realized. Jimmy's mullet bait was gorged by a tarpon about the middle of the morning. At the time the Irish boy chanced to be either half asleep or else thinking of

something else. At any rate, the first thing he knew of the circumstance, and that he was fast to a streak of polished silver, was when the rod he was holding was almost jerked from his hands.

"Whoa, there, ye omadhaun!" shouted Jimmy, immediately bracing his feet so that he might not be pulled from the dinky outright.

Then something sprang from the water not fifty feet away. It was a lordly tarpon, shaking its head, as if hoping to get rid of the barbed hook.

A shriek from Jimmy, echoed by one from Nick, drew the attention of all the others. Even Jack came crawling out from under the motor boat to watch the sport.

It was certainly a great time Jimmy had. That little dinky was dragged around at a furious pace, now darting to the right, and presently whirled about to head toward the left, as some new whim seized upon the captive fish.

Pretty soon Jimmy seemed to be getting dizzy from the rapid evolutions.

"He'll never tire that monster out!" cried Herb.

"And perhaps it might carry him out to sea, and lose him there!" suggested the cautious Josh.

"Well, even if he tired the fish out, it wouldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds; so I think he'd better cut loose," was Jack's dictum.

Accordingly he made a megaphone out of his hands, and shouted:

"Better let him go free, Jimmy; he'll upset you, and perhaps bite you after he gets you in the water!"

"Faith, what shall I be afther doing, then?" came back faintly.

"Cut loose! you've got a knife, haven't you?" called George.

"But I'll lose me line that way, and the hook in the bargain!" remonstrated the reluctant Irish boy.

"Well, better that than your life, or my boat," George told him.

So poor Jimmy found himself compelled to creep forward, when the chance offered, and push the blade of the knife against the taut line. Of course it parted instantly; and he came near capsizing when the little dinky sprang up again, freed from the drag of the big fish.

The tarpon went speeding away toward the gulf, leaping madly out of the water now and then, as though still trying to shake that jewelry from its jaw, or else making sport of dis-

consolate Jimmy, who sat there casting yearning looks after his escaped prize.

He always maintained that it was a two hundred-and-thirty-five-pound fish, though just why he hit upon that odd figure Nick alone could guess. The jewfish he remembered had been calculated to tip the scales at two hundred and thirty pounds. And it is always the largest fish that gets away.

Well, after that disappointment Jimmy might have been pardoned had he given up for the day; but that was not his way. He kept at it all the blessed afternoon. Several bites rewarded his diligence, but he did not succeed in getting fast to another of the silver kings.

And, greatly to his disappointment, the evening came on with the grinning Nick still holding high record in the contest.

Jack had been quite as successful as he had ventured to hope. George and Herb both declared that he had patched the fracture in the ribs and planks of the *Comfort* in a truly shipshape manner; and that there could be no question about the repair holding, up to the time they expected reaching Tampa.

"Then we go on tomorrow, do we?" asked Nick, anxious to get Jimmy away from the tarpon temptation; for he feared the lucky Irish lad might sooner or later get hold of some

monster, which would put his prize out of the running.

Jack said there was nothing to hinder; and with all of them, save perhaps Jimmy, feeling quite happy and contented, the night came on.

In the morning they were off again, and that day they saw the last of that weird region charted as the Ten Thousand Islands. None of them were sorry; indeed, the very monotony of those mangrove covered mud flats had begun to pall upon every member of the expedition.

When they began to see plumed palmetto trees along the shore, the sight brought forth cheers from several of the more joyous among the voyagers.

And it certainly looked more like life to note the buzzards floating overhead again, with pelicans skimming the waves out on the gulf, in search of their fish dinner. There were also many water turkeys, with their snake-like necks, and black cormorants swimming in the lagoons behind the keys.

Jack, who had read up on the subject, related how the Chinese fishermen make use of such birds as these latter, trained for the purpose, to do their fishing for them: a band being fastened around each creature's neck, so that it can never swallow its capture, which is, of course taken possession of by the master.

"We want to make sure to get a good anchorage tonight," Jack remarked to Herb; for the two boats were moving along close together, late that afternoon.

"Why so particular tonight; is it going to be any different from others?" asked the skipper of the *Comfort*.

"Well, I don't just like the looks of that sky over yonder"—and Jack pointed to the southwest as he spoke. "We've been told that in nearly every case these Northers swoop down after the clouds roll up there, the wind changing to nor'west, and the cold increasing. There's something in the air that makes me think we're due right now for our first Norther."

"But to Northern fellows that oughtn't strike a wave of dread," declared Herb. "We're used to winter ice and snow. The thermometer down below zero never bothered me. Why should it down here, when it don't even touch freezing?"

"Let's wait and see," laughed Jack. "After it comes, we'll know more than we do now. But a harbor we must have. Keep your eye peeled for what looks like a good landing place, Herb."

They found this presently, though the key was not so heavily wooded as Jack had hoped

to find; and he did not think it would wholly break the force of the wind, should a gale come roaring down upon them during the night.

When they crawled under their blankets about ten, the sky was clouded over, but nothing else had come to pass. This condition of affairs puzzled Jack, who did not know what to think of it.

But when he was awakened later on by a dull roaring sound, not unlike the noise of a heavy freight train passing over a long trestle, he sprang up, understanding full well what it meant.

"Wake up, everybody; here comes your first Norther!" he shouted at the top of his young and healthy voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHELTER BACK OF THE KEY.

"Oh! what happened?" Nick was heard to call out, in a tremulous voice.

"Get up and hustle! Show a leg here, or you'll be frozen in your blanket!" George shouted, excitedly, for his canvas tent was wabbling in the wind like a thing possessed.

Of course, those in the other boats had little need to worry, since their hunting cabins protected them in a great measure from the violence of the gale. The neglect of George to have the same sort of contrivance placed on the *Wireless,* for fear lest it might reduce the great speed of the boat, always cost him dear when night came, or a storm howled about their ears. One has to pay in some way or other for his whistle; and George was a "speed crank" without any doubt.

For a short time it was feared that the tent on the *Wireless* would actually blow away. Half dressed, the pair aboard hung on with might and main to save the canvas, Nick's teeth chattering tremendously as he shivered in the rapidly falling temperature.

It certainly did get cold in a hurry, too.

Jack would never more smile when he heard old "crackers" tell about the terrors of a Norther. Why, in spite of the protection of the cabin walls, the bitter wind seemed to penetrate to their very marrow.

"Say, Jimmy, this is mighty tough on George and Nick," he remarked to his boatmate, when the wind had passed its worst stage, but the cold seemed to be on the increase.

"It do be the same; and 'tis myself that feels bad for thim this blissed minute," the warm-hearted Irish lad answered, as he swung his arms back and forth to induce circulation, and bring a bit more comfort.

"Just as I feared, the growth ashore is too thin to fend off all the wind; and if this keeps up we'll have the meanest night we ever struck," Jack continued.

Jimmy knew from the signs that the skipper had an idea. He was used to reading Jack by now.

"What can we be afther doing, I dunno, Jack darlint?" he remarked, or rather shouted; for it was simply impossible to hold a conversation in ordinary tones as long as that howling wind kept shrieking through the mangroves and cypress trees near by.

"Get ashore, and throw up some sort of pro-

tection, behind which we can make our fire," Jack answered, readily enough.

"Hurroo! that's the ticket! Let's be afther getting to worrk right away. Sure, annything is betther than howldin' the fort aboard, and shakin' enough to loosen ivery timber in the hull of the dandy little *Tramp.*"

Jimmy was always enthusiastic about everything he went about doing. Consequently, he started ashore immediately, with Jack trailing behind.

When George realized what his chums were doing, he made haste to join them, for he could not but understand that it was mostly on account of the unfortunates aboard the exposed *Wireless* that the effort to build a fire was attempted.

Many hands make light work; and as there happened to be plenty of wood available near by, a fire was soon blazing. Then Nick, unable to hold aloof any longer, came waddling ashore, to offer his services, when nearly everything had been completed.

Jack had found a means of building a wind shield out of various things, and in the shelter of this they hovered, keeping the fire going at top-notch speed.

That night seemed endless to several in the party. They huddled around, swathed in blan-

kets like Esquimaux, and trying to sleep, though Nick was about the only fellow who managed to accomplish much in that line.

Fortunately it did not rain, which was rather an unusual thing, since these cold storms generally start out with a downpour, until the wind shifts into the northwest, when it clears, and turns bitterly severe.

But morning came at last, when they could see to improve the situation. After Josh had cooked the breakfast—and he had plenty of help on this occasion, since every one wanted to cling to the fire as close as possible—all felt better able to meet the situation.

"Nothing like a full stomach to make things look brighter," commented Nick, sighing, as he scraped the frying pan for the last remnant of fried hominy.

The wind kept up all that day, so that the pilgrims found themselves actually storm-bound. Jack would have made a try for another harbor of refuge, only it was so very rough between their key and the main shore that he doubted the ability of the speed-boat to make the passage without a spill; and surely a bird in the hand was better than two in the bush. They could not be sure about improving on their quarters by going further.

Another thing influenced him to remain

where they were. Gradually but surely the wind was going down. The cold remained, but with a dying breeze it did not penetrate so much. It was decided that all of them but the crew of the *Wireless* should sleep aboard their boats on this night. George and Nick were made fairly comfortable by the fire back of the wind shield.

And as Jack had expected, during the night there came another shift of the wind. Following the natural course of the compass, it was in the northeast when dawn arrived, and would soon work around to the east. For, strange to say, down in this country, during the winter season at least, the southeast wind is the very finest that blows; whereas in most other places it has a reputation for being just the meanest known.

All of them were so dead for sleep that the next night passed very quickly. And when morning came the change in the temperature pleased them greatly.

"Let's get a move on, fellows," Jack said, after the customary attention had been given to taking care of the inner man. "We ought to make a big dent in the distance separating us from Meyers today."

"And by the same token," piped up Jimmy,

eagerly, "I'm afther hearin' that the fishing is mighty foine around this section."

"Huh!" grunted Nick, scornfully; "when you beat that record I've hung up, just wake me, and let me know. Time enough then to get a hustle on. Just now it's up to you, Jimmy, to do all the worrying. I'm going to take things easy after this."

"All right, me bhoy, just do that same, and by the pipers it's ye that will be hearin' a cowld, dull thud, which will be that record droppin' to the earth. Sure, it do be a long lane that has no turnin'; and sooner or later, belave me, 'twill be me day."

They made a brave start. George was quite elated with the splendid way his engine worked, and frowned whenever Nick made out to mention that his word had been pledged about that change of motive power at Tampa.

Two hours later the inevitable came to pass.

"George has hauled up short, Jack!" Herb called out; for the *Comfort* was not a great distance behind the *Tramp* at the time, with the other boat, as usual, ahead.

"Perhaps waiting for us?" suggested Jack; but the smile on his face declared that he entertained different ideas about the stoppage.

"That may be," replied Herb, skeptically; "but the chances are he's bucking up against

trouble again. Won't we all be pleased as Punch when he does get a motor that can motor without eternally breaking down? There, Nick's waving his red bandana, which I take it means they've broken down."

And so it proved. A weak place had developed as usual, so that George would be compelled to spend an hour or two mending the same.

Herb generously offered to give him a tow; but this the proud spirit of George would not brook. It was bad enough having to suffer that ignominy when threatened with a storm, but when the gulf was smooth nothing could induce him to accept.

"You fellows go right along," George called out; "and I'll overtake you later."

But neither Jack nor Herb would think of such a thing. If a heavy wind chanced to come up while the *Wireless* lay there, positively helpless, she would roll frightfully, and stand a chance of capsizing.

And so they simply hung around until the makeshift repairs had been completed, so that the speed boat could again proceed under her own power.

This lost them so much time that it was no longer possible to think of reaching the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River, and ascending

as far as Meyers, that day. So they kept an eye out for a snug harbor, where they might pass the night.

The coast was not so desolate here as below. They had passed the settlement of Naples; and here and there could see where shacks, or more pretentious buildings, told of the presence of fruit or truck growers.

Finally, toward the middle of the afternoon, coming upon just the place that would afford them a good camping ground, the three boats pulled in.

Jack had noticed that Jimmy was showing signs of growing excitement as they proceeded to anchor. The Irish boy had been using the marine glasses with more or less eagerness; and no sooner was the boat made secure than he broke out with:

"Excuse me, if ye plase, Jack darlint, but I've a most pressin' engagement this minute. I do be sayin' me chanct to get aven with me rival."

He was even at the time throwing a number of things into the little dinky, among others a section of rope. Nick, while not overhearing what was said, must have noticed the active preparations for a sudden campaign. His round, red face appeared over the side of the

Wireless, as Jimmy pushed off and rowed furiously away.

"Now, what in the dickens does all that mean, Jack?" he asked. "Is Jimmy going to make the trip to Meyers in that dinky, or has he got an idea in his head he can bag something that will make me look like thirty cents?"

"I rather guess that's just the sort of bee he's got in his bonnet, Nick," laughed Jack, "and if you look out yonder, where that reef lies in shallow water, with the little waves breaking over it, you'll see what's started him going."

Nick hunted around until he found George's glasses, which he clapped to his eyes, to burst out with a cry of astonishment and chagrin.

"Say, it must be a big porpoise that's got stranded out there! My eye! look at it kick up the water, would you? Oh! if Jimmy ever gets a rope around that thing, and tries to ride it ashore, won't he be in a peck of trouble, though? But when Jimmy sets out to do anything, you just can't frighten him off; and, honest now, I believe he's bent on doing that same mad caper!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

JIMMY FORGES TO THE FRONT.

None of them could have any doubt about it; for was not the excited Jimmy making toward that same reef with all speed? Determined to wrest the laurels from his rival, if it could possibly be done, he had only too eagerly seized upon this fine chance to get in some strenuous work.

Looking beyond, they could see that the stranded porpoise, if the object out yonder really proved to be such a creature, still threshed the water and strove to break away from its place of captivity.

"What ails the bally thing?" grumbled the anxious Nick. "Why don't it back off, the same way it came on? That's the only way it could get into deep water. Did you ever see such a looney, trying to keep on shoving ahead, when all the while it gets in more shallow water?"

"Huh! seems to me there are others!" chuckled Josh; "jewfish, for instance, don't seem to have one bit more sense. Sometimes they get left on a shallow place, and kick like

fun, while waiting for the tide to rise and help 'em off."

"Ah! let up on that, Josh; 'taint fair to take his side all the time," complained the fat boy, straining his eyes to follow the movement of his rival, now more than half way out to the reef.

"Well, we always stand up for the under dog; and just now Jimmy's in that position," continued Josh.

"Yes," spoke up George, encouragingly, "and when you get there, Nick, as you may sooner or later, you'll see how gladly we'll all give you our sympathy, eh, boys?"

Nick refused to be comforted by the prospect.

"Hey! Jack," he said, turning to the skipper of the *Tramp,* who seemed to be bending over his motor, as if about to turn his engine; for a sudden idea had come into his head, "is a porpoise a *real* fish, now?"

"Whatever makes you ask that?" demanded Herb.

"Oh! I want to know, that's all," replied Nick, coolly. "That Jimmy tries to just throw his old net over anything that creeps, swims or walks, and call it a fish. He tried it on us with his blessed old alligator, you remember, fellers; then, when we wouldn't stand for that,

don't you know how he tried to hook up one of the sea cows they call a manatee, and make us take that? Now he's after a porpoise; and if he keeps on he'd grab a hippopotamus, and try to bluff us at that. Anything that goes in water answers for Jimmy."

"Well, if he gets a porpoise, he's got a fish without any reason to kick over the traces, Nick, and don't you forget that," George declared.

"Say, where you going, Jack?" demanded Nick, suspiciously.

"Why, I thought I'd better take a little spin out there, to keep an eye on Jimmy," replied the other.

"What for? You don't think of lending him a hand, I hope? Remember, the rules of the game knocks all that sort of thing on the head," Nick protested, vigorously.

"No danger of my forgetting," laughed Jack. "But I happened to think how bold Jimmy can be, and wondered if he mightn't get in trouble somehow."

"That's right, Jack," spoke up George, himself a very rash fellow on occasion; "it'd be just like him to hitch on to that porpoise, and help work him loose. Then we'd see our poor chum going out to sea like a railroad lim-

ited express. And Jack, if you'll allow me, I guess I'll drop in, and keep you company."

"Same here," declared Herb, crawling aboard, as he pulled the *Tramp* close to the starboard quarter of the *Comfort*.

"Hey! wait for me, can't you!" exclaimed Nick, all excitement now. "Who's got as much interest in this business as me, tell me that? I ought to be along to judge if he takes his fish in fair play, you know."

"Fair play!" jeered Josh, as he too slid into the other boat after Nick; "well, I like that, now, after the way you lugged that poor old weakened jewfish to camp. Any way Jimmy can grab his game will count; and you might as well make up your mind to it first as last, my boy."

"Oh! don't you get to bothering your head about me, Josh Purdue," Nick went on to say, stoutly; "I'm a true sport, and can take my medicine when I have to, as good as the next one. And I guess I don't give up easy, do I? But it ain't time for the shoutin' yet. Jimmy hasn't got his porpoise; and it mebbe don't weigh more'n two hundred and thirty pounds, either."

Leaving the other two boats anchored in quiet water, Jack headed the *Tramp* for the reef, where the water was breaking softly

over the submerged rocks; with the unfortunate porpoise floundering in a helpless manner, for the tide was almost at its lowest level.

Jimmy had by now arrived on the spot. He must have arranged his plan of campaign as he was rowing frantically out, for he lost no time in getting down to business.

Those who looked saw him push his way up to the reef after his usual bold fashion. If some water came aboard the little dinky, Jimmy gave the circumstance no heed. All he could see was that struggling monster of the deep, and the happy opportunity that had been thrown in his way whereby he might cut his rival out of the lead he had held so long.

For that joyous conclusion Jimmy was ready to take all sorts of chances.

"Look at him, getting right up alongside the kicker!" exclaimed Nick, with an expression of amazement on his rosy face; for he could not help admiring the nerve exhibited by his rival, even though deep down in his heart he hoped the other might fail to land the prize.

"Sure he is!" laughed Josh. "Why, just keep your eye peeled, Nick, old boy, and my word for it, you'll see our little chum climb right on the back of that bucking broncho of

the gulf, put a bridle in his mouth, and ride him home!"

"Oh! rats! you can't get me to believe that!" Nick flashed back; and yet, despite his brave words, he watched the actions of the Irish lad with deep anxiety, as if believing that no one could tell what wonderful things Jimmy might not attempt.

"Look there, would you!" he exclaimed, a few seconds later; "what under the sun has Jimmy got now?"

"Seems to me like it's our ax!" declared George, with a harsh laugh.

"Ax!" snorted the indignant Nick; "d'ye mean to tell me he expects to knock that poor porpoise on the head, just like they do steers at the stockyards; and then claim he *caught* him? Well, I like that, now!"

"It's all in the game, Nick," declared Herb, consolingly. "Remember, you didn't use a fish hook and line to bag your big jewfish; just slung a rope around his gills, and walked away with him through the shallow water near the shore. I reckon even an ax might count, so long as he keeps the fish, and brings him in!"

"Sho!" Nick went on, as though disgusted; "but just think of getting a fish with such a tool, as if you were just chopping a tree!"

"Watch him, now, if you want to see how

Jimmy goes at it; perhaps you may be only too glad to do the same thing later on, when you want to climb up and throw him off the first rung of the ladder," Herb remarked.

"Yes," said wise Josh, "it makes all the difference in the world what position you hold when condemning practices. What looks bad to you, seems fair and square to Jimmy right now."

"Wow! what a crack that was!" George exclaimed, as Jimmy brought down the ax on the struggling fish.

"But he hasn't got him yet, anyway," muttered Nick, as they saw the water whipped into foam around the little, wabbling dinky boat occupied by Jimmy.

"He nearly took a header that time, let me tell you!" cried Herb.

"But he sticks to his job, all right!" laughed Jack. "See, he's aiming to get in another crack, and there it goes. Whew! that was a stunner, though!"

"A regular sockdolager!" avowed Josh, who was apparently enjoying the circus first-rate.

"And it looks like it knocked the poor old porpoise out of the running," commented Herb.

"That's what it did!" George declared; "and there's Jimmy trying to get a hitch with

his rope around the thing's tail. He's gone and done it, as sure as you live! See him stop to wave his hand at us; and he's got the widest grin on his face you ever saw. Victory comes sweet after having it rubbed in so long."

"Huh! how d'ye know the bally old porpoise is goin' to stand for more than my jewfish?" Nick grumbled; though his face began to wear a look that comes with chagrin and defeat; "and even if it does, that don't wind things up. Ain't I got just as much chance to bag something bigger before we haul up at New Orleans, tell me that, Josh Purdue?"

"Course you have, Nick, old top," declared Josh, who hoped to see the rivalry kept up to the very last, since it was affording them all so much fun; "and we'll back you for the boy who can do big stunts, once you wake up to it; eh, fellers?"

Jimmy was now starting to row back toward where the two other motor boats were at anchor. He made but slow progress of it, towing that now quiet captured porpoise; but the rules of the game prevented the others from giving him any sort of a lift.

Now and then the porpoise would get stranded in the shallow water, and at such times Jimmy was put to his wits' ends to man-

age. But by slow degrees he succeeded in accomplishing the object he had in view.

Of course the others did not wait for him, but ran back to where the camp was to be made for the night. Josh was anxious to get ashore, and start a fire; for all of them confessed to being hungry. Nick only made one more remark on the way back, and that gave them an inkling of his ruling passion."

"I say, Jack, do you know whether a porpoise is good to eat?" he asked.

Jack replied that he had never heard of any one eating one, though perhaps the meat might appeal to certain appetites, like those of Esquimaux, or the Indians of Alaska.

"I don't think we'll bother about it, however," Josh remarked, "because we've got plenty besides."

Supper was well on the way when finally Jimmy landed, his beaming face wet with honest perspiration, and filled with the pride that followed his recent exploit.

They all came down to view his capture, and estimate the weight of the porpoise. The opinion seemed to be that, while a small one, it must weigh something close on to two hundred and fifty pounds; but Nick declared he would have to demand the proof before giving in.

CHAPTER XIX.

FROM TAMPA, NORTH.

Everybody was merry that night at supper but Nick. He tried not to show that he felt his sudden and unexpected drop from the top of the ladder to the lower rung; but it was hard work. His laughter was only a hollow mockery, so Josh declared; for the lean boy certainly did like to rub it into his fat chum when he had a chance.

Jimmy did not sleep well that night, though everything combined to make it a pleasant occasion for most of the others. Half a dozen times he would creep out of his blankets to see if the porpoise was still where he had tied it, and lying in shallow water. Evidently he feared lest some adventurous and hungry shark come nosing around, and attempt to run away with his prize, before its weight had been positively settled.

Once Jack heard him poking vigorously in the water with a pole, and muttering to himself.

"Want to take a lunch off me porpoise, is it ye'd be afther doin', ye sly ould thafe of

the worrld?" Jimmy was saying, as he punched vigorously.

"What is it?" asked Jack, looking over the side of the *Tramp;* as he happened to be up just then, to find out what his shipmate meant by getting out long before the first streak of daylight was due.

"Sure, it's the bally ould crabs; they do be tryin' to nibble at me fish; and it kapes me busy shooing the same away," Jimmy answered back.

"But what's the use bothering, since we don't expect to eat the thing?" asked the other.

"Yes," said Jimmy, quickly; "but they say ivery little bit helps; and wouldn't I be the sad gossoon, now, if me fish weighed just the same as Nick's, with some missing where thim sassy big crabs had had a breakfast. Sure, I want all I got, till we weigh the beauty. Afther that they can have it all, for what I care."

"Oh! that's where the shoe pinches, does it?" chuckled Jack. "Well, perhaps you'd better sit up, and keep watch, Jimmy. But please don't shake the boat so much, and wake me again. It's only three o'clock, with the old moon near the eastern horizon. Me to bed again for another snooze."

When morning came Jimmy blandly informed Jack that he had actually spent the

balance of the night with that pole in his hands, every now and then stirring the water in the vicinity of his prize.

"And I do be thinkin'," he added, triumphantly, "that the crabs niver got aven a teenty bit of me bully ould fish. Now to rig up that balance once more, and settle the question once for all."

"Now, just you hold your horses, there," spoke up Nick, shaking his head grimly. "You're wrong, that's what. Even if your old porpoise does happen to be a little heavier than my splendid jewfish, don't you think for a minute I'm going to give up the ship. I'll be warm on your trail, old chap, to the last gasp!"

"Hear! hear!" cried Josh, clapping his hands in a manner which was calculated to encourage both stubborn contestants. "I'm backing Nick for a game one. He's got the real bulldog grit, and don't you forget it, boys! And even if Jimmy wins this time, he'll have to watch out, or he'll find himself left in the lurch."

The rude balances were constructed as before, and after getting the porpoise ashore, it was duly weighed. Had it happened to be a close thing, Nick of a certainty would have entered a protest, and demanded that they tow

the prize to the next town, where it could be tested on the dock with some capable scales. But it was quickly discovered that the porpoise was many pounds heavier than Nick's record; indeed, they decided finally, after making all due allowances, to put it down positively at two hundred and seventy-five pounds.

Even Nick concurred in this, although with a wry face, for he had clung tenaciously to hope up to the very last moment. And so the crabs had a chance to feast on the bulky object after all; though Jack declared that if they had had the time he would have liked to try and render the porpoise for its oil, just to say he had secured a supply that way.

"And think of the numberless fine shoe laces we're throwing away," sighed Josh, after they had abandoned Jimmy's prize.

After a fine run they made Miami, and spent a day in the enterprising little town; but all of them were anxious to be getting on, since they expected the next mail to be awaiting them at Tampa; and it had been a long time now since they had heard from the dear ones at home.

Tampa was reached without any further adventures, though Nick proved that his words had been no idle boast when saying that if Jimmy went up head in the little game of fish

rivalry, he would leave no stone unturned in the effort to regain his lost laurels.

He never let a chance pass to put out one or more lines. And since size was now his one object in life, he no longer bothered with a rod and line. If the fellows wanted fish for eating purposes, somebody else must take the trouble to capture them, because he was too busy to bother with small fry.

So every night he would get out his shark hook, and set it in the best place he could find, where he believed he would have a chance to make a capture.

The tables had turned, and it was now Jimmy's turn to strut around with that look of superiority on his face. He would watch Nick's feverish labors, and just grin in a way that gave the rest of the boys great amusement.

But, although several sharks were caught, they seemed to be in league with Jimmy; for it was only the small fellows who took the hook. Nick's excitement, when he was working his catch in by the aid of a snubbing post which Jack showed him how to make, was always succeeded by bitter disappointment, after he had discovered the disgusting size of the caught sea tiger.

Not one of them up to now had weighed anything near the required weight. But all

the time the sanguine fat boy lived in hopes of some fine day making a record strike.

The others hoped he would, seeing how much his heart was set on proving himself true game. This rivalry would prove to be a great thing for Nick. It had started him into doing things that otherwise he would never have dreamed of attempting, being somewhat given to laziness, as so many boys built after his stout fashion seem to be. And it had made him think, too, which was a fine thing; throwing him on his own resources, as it were, and bringing out many hidden attributes which the others had never dreamed he possessed.

At Tampa Nick insisted that George keep his word. So, as the three boats had been laid up in the yard of a boat builder, a new motor was installed aboard the *Wireless*. George was so devoted to his boat and its speed record, that he refused to be away from the scene of operations for any length of time.

"One day around Tampa is enough for me, boys," he had declared, when they tried to tempt him to accompany them on the second day. "I want to be around, and watch how they do this job. It would give me a bad jolt, you know, if I had to sacrifice speed for steadiness after all, when I'm hoping to combine both."

"Yes," laughed Josh, "it'd sure break George's heart if he couldn't just shoot through the water like an arrow. If he had his way he'd go at about the rate of ninety miles an hour."

"Make it an even hundred, Josh, while you're about it," George remarked, calmly; and meant it, too.

A number of days were passed in the hustling city on Tampa Bay. Jack had always been anxious to see the place; and during the time of their enforced stay they certainly took in every point of interest worth observing.

And of course the *Comfort* was duly repaired in a proper manner while the opportunity offered. The boat builder complimented Jack on having done such a reliable job under such difficult conditions. He declared that the chances were, the repairs would have held out through the whole cruise, though it was best that they have the hole obliterated in shipshape style once for all.

But all of them were really glad when, one fine morning, after another Norther had blown itself out, and the big bay calmed down, the little flotilla of three motor boats started away from Tampa, headed south, so as to get around the end of the Pinellas Peninsula.

Nick especially was sighing for new chances

to show what he could do in the fishing line.

"There must be sharks upwards of three hundred pounds and more that will take my hook," he declared, stoutly, to George, as they boomed along down the bay; "and in good time I'm going to show you something that will make you sit up and take notice, see if I don't."

"Say, she runs like oiled silk!" exclaimed the skipper of the new *Wireless;* and from this remark Nick realized that, according to George, all his affairs were as a mere dot compared with the great question as to what the new motor would do.

After trying the boat in various ways, George expressed himself as satisfied that he had made a good thing when he decided to have the engine changed. And all the others began to hope that the troubles of the speed boat skipper might now be in the past.

Tampa Bay is so big that the motor boats felt the swell almost as much as though they were upon the gulf itself. And that afternoon, when, after passing sharply to the right. they placed Long Key between themselves and the sea, all expressed themselves as pleased at the change.

Here they made out to pass the night. Nick could hardly wait until the anchors had been

dropped before he was begging Jack to go off with the castnet, and get him a supply of mullet for bait, so he could begin his fishing operations. And as Jack was feeling that a supper of mullet would taste rather good, if so be the jumping fish proved to be plentiful, he did not have to be coaxed long.

Consequently the shark line was soon doing business at the old stand; and as usual there arose a wordy war between the two rivals concerning the finish of the game; each feeling stoutly confident that in the end he would be in a condition to carry off the prize.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SHARK FISHERMAN.

"How long have we got before we ought to be home?" asked Herb, that night, as they prepared to camp ashore.

"Nearly three weeks left of our time," remarked Josh, sadly; for, much as they wanted to see the dear ones, they would all be sorry when the vacation had reached its end, and once more they must take up school duties at home.

"But looky here," piped up Nick, "my dad wrote me that they'd had a bad hitch about building the high school again. Seems like there was a labor strike that tied up everything. It ain't settled yet, he says, and if it ain't done soon, why, the chances are there won't be any session at all this Spring, because they don't know just where to house us!"

"Glory be!" cried Jimmy; "oh! what an illegant toime we could be afther having, down in this cruiser's paradise, if so be thim laborin' men only hold the fort a little longer!"

He voiced the sentiment that filled every heart, although no one else had spoken a word as yet.

"That would be too good to be true," Jack laughed, shaking his head.

"Yes, and we mustn't let the idea get hold of us, because we'd only be disappointed all the more," Herb remarked.

"But we'll know by the time we get to New Orleans, won't we?" demanded Nick, with set jaws, and a flash to his blue eyes; "because, you see, I'm interested more'n the rest of you."

"Say ye so?" burst out Jimmy, wickedly, and chuckling under his breath.

"Because it would give me plenty of time to burst bubbles that are floating around here, and establish a new record," Nick went on, pugnaciously.

"Then, by the powers," Jimmy declared, "I do be hopin' that we spind the whole bally winter down here. It amuses me to see ye worrk, Nick. An', by the same token, it's doin' ye a hape of good in the bargain, so it is."

They had reached Cedar Keys, and everything was going well. George still found more or less reason to congratulate himself on his wisdom in making that change in his motive power. Now and then Jack saw him pondering, and understood that there was a fly in the ointment somewhere; but George had said nothing, and they could only hazard a guess as to whether it might be a diminution

of speed, or the old haunting fear of a breakdown still gripping his heart.

"Where do we strike next for mail?" asked Herb, the night after leaving the city on the key, when, after passing the mouth of the famous Suwanee River, they had pulled up back of a friendly key.

"Pensacola is our next port; and I hope we find more letters waiting for us than there were here," George replied.

"Now, that's quare," remarked Jimmy, with a twinkle in his eye; "when ivery one of us got a letter from the folks back home. But I do be fearin' the little girlie with the rosy cheeks, and the dimple in her chin forgot to write that toime."

"Well, what's that to anybody but me?" said George, facing them all boldly.

The conversation immediately switched to another subject, for George was rather touchy about having his private affairs talked about by his chums. Had it been Nick, now, or even Jimmy, they would have answered back in the same humor, and the fun waxed fast and furious.

But at the time Nick was busy with that shark line of his. He fancied that as the tide came in and went out through what might be called an inlet, always with more or less con-

fusion, there was a pretty good chance to hook one of the sea tigers, if only he took pains.

"We've changed our course again, haven't we, Jack?" Herb asked.

"That's so," came the reply; "you see, the coast no longer runs nearly north and south here, but turns to the west. And if one of those old Northers bursts on us now, why, we'll get it from land side instead of the gulf; unless it whirls around, something these winter blows seldom do; because, you see, they don't happen to be of the tornado, or hurricane type, just straight wind storms."

Jack was always a fund of information to his mates. He studied things at every opportunity, and never forgot a fact he had learned. And it was surprising how the others had come by degrees to depend on him in all sorts of emergencies.

"I do be glad, Jack, darlint," remarked Jimmy, just then, "that ye make Nick put on a loife preserver ivery toime he do be going in that cranky dinky, to carry out his baited shark hook. It's him that is so clumsy, the boat looks like 'twould turrn over at any minute, so it does. And he so fat and juicy, how do we know some hungry shark mightn't loike to take a bite out of him? Look now at the gossoon, would ye, and how he worrks? In

all me experience I niver yit saw such a change as there has been in our Nick."

"Yes, that's so," laughed Herb. "You know, they say competition is the life of trade; and it seems to be putting a good lot of life in Nick Longfellow. Why, he jumps around now like nobody ever saw him do before. If this keeps up long, he'll be able to play on our baseball team next season. Wow! just imagine the Ice Wagon galloping across centre to grab a long fly!"

Meanwhile, the object of all this talk was paying strict attention to business. He had been shark fishing so many times now that he seemed to have the whole thing down to a fine science. After baiting his bog hook, with its attendant chain, he dropped it in a promising place. Then he made for the shore, paying out the stout line as he went most carefully.

Once on the sandy strip of beach, Nick fastened the rope to the nearest tree he could find, first taking a couple of hitches around a stake he had driven in deeply, not far from the water's edge, and which was to serve as a snubbing post, in case he were lucky enough to make a strike.

"It's very pat," remarked Jack, when the stout youth rejoined the group about the fire, "that if any of us want to know about sharks,

their habits, and how best to get the pirates of the sea ashore, we've got to go to Nick here."

"Yes," spoke up George, "he ought to be a walking dictionary of terms; because he's always asking questions of every cracker and sponger we meet. I honestly believe, boys, he keeps a shark book, and that he's got an idea of writing the family tree up some day."

"Oh! come off," grinned Nick; "after I've hauled a dandy weighing about half a ton on shore, and showed you what I can do, I guess the whole business can go hang, for all of me. What use are they, anyhow? You can't eat em."

"That's the way Nick always judges things," declared George. "If they don't happen to be good for food, he's got mighty little use for the same."

"I ain't denying it, am I?" queried the other, good-naturedly. "What are we here for, anyway, but to eat our way through this dreary old world? Of course, don't go and think I believe eating's the *only* thing worth living for; but it cuts a big figure with me. Guess I was born half starved, and I've been tryin' all I knew how ever since to make it up."

"And by the powers, ye look that happy now, I be afther thinkin' ye must expect to

pull in the champion fish this same night," Jimmy commented.

"Well, I've got a hunch that something is about due," Nick replied, confidently. "There's a fishy smell about this place, seems to me; and I just reckon that in times past many a dandy old shark has been yanked up on this same beach. That tideway looked good to me, too; and by now, as Jack said, I ought to know something about the hungry crew. Just wait and see what happens, that's all."

Jimmy became a little uneasy. Perhaps it was in the air that his day to fall had come around in due time. He cast frequent glances over toward the snubbing post as the evening drew on, with twilight succeeding the setting of the sun.

Nick had heard Jack telling how he went pickerel fishing on the ice one winter, and the methods of telling when a fish took the hook appealed to him. Consequently he employed the same sort of tactics when in pursuit of nobler game.

"For, you see, they call a pickerel or a pike a fresh-water shark," he had explained, when first testing the plan; "and what is good for one, ought to work with the other."

At the top of the snubbing post he had fastened an iron ring. The rope passed through

this, being secured by a staple that could be easily dislodged, as it was intended for only temporary use.

Back of the post the line was coiled up several times, and a white rag fastened to it at a certain point. When a shark carried off the baited hook, this slack would quickly pass through the ring at the top of the stout post, so that the flag must mount upward, and signal to the alert fisherman that he had made a strike; when he could hasten to attend to his captive.

They were eating supper, as the night closed in. Nick had seated himself in a comfortable position, where he might occasionally raise his eyes, and by a turn of the head look off in the direction where his trap was laid.

During the earlier part of the meal he had paid strict attention to business, and glanced that way about once a minute faithfully. But as the spirit of feasting took a firmer clutch upon his soul, the fat boy began to forget.

Not so Jimmy. He had taken up his quarters so that he might observe the goings on at the snubbing post without even turning his head. And as he munched away at what he had on his tin platter, the Irish lad kept a close watch for the flaunting of the tell-tale signal.

Jack saw this, and he knew that all he had to do in order to keep fully posted as to the way things were working, was to watch Jimmy, whose freckled face would serve as a thermometer.

And after a while, when it was almost pitch-dark around the camp on the edge of the water, he discovered that Jimmy was staring at the snubbing post as though fascinated. His lips were working, too, though apparently he was having a hard time trying to speak, and tell his rival that the trap was working.

But Jimmy was clean-cut and generous, even to one with whom he had entered into a contest for supremacy; and presently he burst forth.

"Would ye be afther getting a move on, Nick?" he exclaimed. "There's the flag a flutterin' on the top of the post like a signal man wigwaggin' in the Boy Scouts troop! And by the powers, it's gone now, pulled clane out of the socket. Be off with ye; for, by the same token, ye've cotched the granddaddy of all the sharrks, I do belave!"

CHAPTER XXI.

VICTORY COMES TO NICK.

"Whoop! here I go, fellers!" shouted Nick, as, scrambling awkwardly to his feet, he hurried along the beach toward the spot where he had left his shark line.

Of course the rest hastened to follow after him. They found the fat boy bending down and feeling of the taut rope.

"Gee whittaker! but I've caught the biggest ever, I do believe!" Nick was crying. "Just feel that line, would you? Acts like it had hold of a house, with the tide running out. Say, it'll take me all night to get that monster ashore; but I'll do it; you hear me warble, Jimmy, I'll do it!"

"Good for you, Nick!" laughed Jack.

"We'll back you up to win out, if you only keep everlastingly at it," remarked Herb.

"And don't be afther forgettin' the rules of the game, all of ye," warned Jimmy. "Nobody must put a finger on the loine to hilp Nick. I want to see him have fair play, so I do. And, by the same token, if he bates me by three hundred pounds, I'll be the firrst

gossoon to congratulate him on his success. You know that, boys."

"Sure we do, Jimmy," spoke up George.

"It wouldn't be like you not to do the same," declared Josh.

"You know what you've just got to do, Nick," remarked Jack.

"Guess I do," chuckled the owner of the outfit, as he looked eagerly out over the darkening water to that point toward which the taut line seemed to extend; but if he entertained a faint hope that the prisoner would leap into view while trying to get rid of the steel barb, he mistook the nature of the shark, which bores deep, and tries to do by main strength what a tarpon, a trout, a salmon or a black bass attempts by that upward fling, and shake of the head.

"He's going it pretty furious right now," Josh observed.

"Yes, and the harder he pulls the better," Nick said. "That'll help to tire the old chap out, and make it easier for poor me to get him ashore, foot by foot, by making use of my snubbing post here. But let's go back and finish our supper, boys. If the hook holds, and the rope is as good as I think, he'll be here tugging away an hour from now, just as much as he is now."

"That's where your head's level, Nick," commented Jack.

And so the whole party wended their way back to where the camp-fire blazed on the shore. Here the pleasant task of finishing their meal was once more resumed. Some of them thought Nick was really devouring even more than usual, though that might be hard to believe.

"He wants to get his strength up to top-notch!" laughed Herb.

"Well," observed Nick, calmly, as he reached deliberately over, and took the last helping of Boston baked beans from the tin kettle in which they had been heated for the meal; "I hate to see things go to waste; and there are some fellers around who don't seem to know what's good."

"I've noticed," Josh remarked, drily, "that you don't mind how much goes to *your* waist, all right."

Nick only groaned at the pun, and went on cleaning out his platter, as though he believed in always laying in a healthy supply of food, since nobody could tell when another chance might come around.

Afterwards they lay about the camp and told stories, joked and even sang school songs. Nick seemed in no great hurry to take up the

task that awaited him. He knew from former experiences just what it meant. But that the subject was on his mind all the while was made manifest from what he said.

"Jack, I want to ask you a question!" he began.

"Well, fire away, then," suggested the other, with a nod of invitation.

"If, now, this fellow at the end of my line turns out to be so heavy that I just can't budge him, when I get the chump at the edge of the water, would it be breaking the rules if I borrowed that block and tackle to help yank him out, so you can all see him, and estimate his weight?"

"How about that, fellows?" asked Jack, looking around with a wink toward the other chums.

"Why, of course he can make use of any means, so long as no other person lends a hand to assist him," George gave as his opinion.

"That's what!" Josh added.

"If he goes and gets the falls and fixes the whole blooming business himself, of course he's got the right to do it," declared Herb.

"And I do be saying that it's a clever schame, that does Nick credit," was the verdict of Jimmy.

"That settles it, then, Nick," Jack decided.

"It's unanimous, you hear; and if you want, you can go and get the block and tackle arranged right now."

"Oh! do you think, then, I'll surely need it, Jack?" asked the fat boy, trembling with joyous anticipations; for from the tenor of Jack's words he expected that they all believed he had caught the biggest of sharks, one that would make that little porpoise of Jimmy's look like a baby.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you did," Jack replied, with a reassuring nod.

Accordingly, after he had cleaned off his pannikin, and not a second sooner, Nick hunted up the rope and blocks with which they had hauled the *Comfort* out on skids at the time of her accident.

By a skillful use of such an apparatus, one man's strength is made equal to that of several; and the boys had learned this fact through actual experience.

"Let us know when you expect to get busy," called out Herb, as Nick went off with the falls.

"Yes, because we want to enjoy it all, you know, Nick," sang out George.

Perhaps half an hour passed, with the fat boy busily engaged getting his apparatus ready. Then they heard him give a call.

"Hi! hello, there! fellers; suppose somebody

starts a fire agoing for me here; that's allowable, ain't it, Jack?" he demanded.

"Why, of course, since it hasn't anything to do with getting the shark ashore," the one addressed responded, as all of them jumped up.

"I'm ready to begin yanking him in now; but it's so pesky gloomy I ain't able to see just right," Nick continued. "It'd be a shame now if I lost this dandy chap just because I didn't see how to work him."

Some of the boys gathered dead leaf stalks from under a nearby palmetto, and in next to no time they had a fine, ruddy blaze crackling close by the spot where Nick was standing, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and an air of grim determination about his whole person.

The first thing he did was to make sure the rope went twice around the snubbing post, so that he might always have a hitch. Then he fastened the end of the rope belonging to the falls to the strained fish line, a dozen feet beyond the snubbing post.

His operations were watched with considerable interest by his mates, who realized that quite a transformation was rapidly taking place in the character of the once placid and indolent fat boy.

"Here goes, then!" exclaimed Nick, as he

threw his full weight on the rope that went through the several blocks.

They could hear him grunting at a great rate, which indicated what an effort it was to get the shark started shoreward against his will.

"Bully! he's beginning to make it!" whooped George, greatly excited.

"Hurrah for Nick!" shouted Josh.

"Walk away with it, me bhoy!" cried Jimmy, as though quite forgetting that success for Nick meant defeat for him.

The stout fisherman was indeed doing just what Jimmy advised, and walking away with things. When he had gone as far as he could, he managed to whip the rope around some object. Then, returning to the now slack fishing line, above the spot where he had fastened the falls, he drew it taut around the snubbing post.

"He gained at least ten feet that time," declared Jack.

"But, oh! my! ain't the old terror mad, though?" exclaimed George. "Just see how he pulls, would you, boys?"

"Give him another turn, Nick," advised Jack.

Unfastening the falls, Nick took the second

hitch, and as before this was some distance below the snubbing post.

Again he bent his stout back, and, aided by the tackle, he succeeded in bringing the struggling sea monster closer in to the shore.

Everything was working smoothly, and by the time he had repeated his effort a good many times they could see from the terrific splashing that the prisoner was already in shoal water.

"Do you think I'm going to get him?" gasped poor, winded Nick, as he wiped his streaming forehead, and tried to get ready for the hardest tug of all; for, with a dead weight on the sand to haul, he could no longer count on the buoyancy of the water.

"Well, I should smile, yes," declared George. "At him again, Ginger; never say die! Set 'em up in the other alley! This is a great treat to us, Nick, I tell you!"

But Nick was already busy. With the rope over his shoulder, and his toes digging in the sand, he tugged away like a good fellow, gaining inch by inch. This time he succeeded in dragging the shark all the way out of the water, so that it lay exposed to their view.

"Hurroo! he done it!" shouted Jimmy, with an utter disregard for the rules of grammar, that would have horrified his teachers, had

any of them heard him; but Jimmy had one set of rules to mark his vacation manners, and another covering his connection with the seats of learning; and when he wished could talk just as correctly as the next one.

They gathered around, full of wonder at the size and ferocity of the monster, that even then lay there on the sand, snapping savagely at everything.

"Will it beat Jimmy's porpoise?" asked Nick, proudly.

"Half again as heavy!" declared Jack; "for I reckon it must weigh all of four hundred pounds."

CHAPTER XXII.

WHERE AMBITION LED.

True to his word, the generous Irish lad was the very first to grasp Nick's blistered hand and congratulate him on his wonderful success.

"That's what comes of stick-at-it-tiveness," declared Herb, ponderously, as he, too, gripped the fingers of the successful shark fisherman.

Nick was allowed to get the rifle, and wind up the career of the savage sea monster. In the morning they estimated his weight, just as they had done with others in the past. Everybody was satisfied to agree with that first guess which Jack made, and call it four hundred. And they declared that Nick was a wonder, in that with only the assistance of the falls, he had dragged such a monster up on the beach.

The voyage was resumed that day, and for the better part of a week they were put to it dodging storms, making outside runs when the fair weather allowed of their braving the open gulf, and extricating themselves from various unpleasant predicaments, when they managed to lose themselves in what had promised to

be a convenient cut-off, but which proved a trap in the shape of shallow water, with many chances of the boats sticking in the mud.

After Pensacola would come Mobile; and then the next place they expected to reach would be their destination, New Orleans.

Each night as they figured on the time that still remained, a sense of gloom would descend upon the camp, though Jack or else Jimmy soon dissipated it by some joking remark, or it might be by bursting out into ragtime song. But they had had such a glorious time since starting out on this remarkable voyage that they viewed its approaching finish with a feeling bordering on dismay.

Jimmy had now taken to being haunted by a desire to eclipse the great feat of his stout rival. Though it did not seem that there might be one chance in fifty of his succeeding in capturing a fish that would exceed the weight of that monster shark, Jimmy had developed an industrious trait.

Early and late his mind was set upon the game. Nick had generously turned over his shark tackle to the other. He guaranteed that it was sound, and capable of sustaining any strain.

So Jimmy would each night do just what the other had been engaged in until recently;

and the way he attended to that line was worthy of all praise.

But, although hardly a night went by that he did not make some sort of capture, his best effort fell far short of the necessary heft, and Nick began to feel that the wager was as good as won. Nevertheless, he watched all that Jimmy did with a certain amount of interest, not to say anxiety, knowing that there is, according to the old saying, "many a slip between the cup and the lip."

All of them were in the very best of health, and in this the voyage down the coast, and around the end of Florida among the keys had done them good. Even Josh seemed to have recovered from his spell of indigestion, and was able to do his share of the eating.

How could it be otherwise, when they were living in the open air day and night, drinking in the pure ozone all the while; with contented minds, and plenty to appease the healthy demands of the inner man?

So one fine afternoon they headed up the wide bay leading to Pensacola, expecting to get more home letters here. George had a wrinkle between his eyes at times, but this was not on account of any anxiety in connection with a girl he had left behind him, as

some of the others jokingly declared. The fact was, his new engine was giving him a little trouble.

"Tell you what, George," Herb had said, when they had to stop an hour for the other to do some work, in order to induce the motor to carry on its part; "your old *Wireless* is just a hoodoo, and that's what ails you."

"Huh!" grunted George, in disgust, "I'm beginning to believe that way myself, to be honest now. I've done everything a fellow could do, even to installing a new and guaranteed motor; yet here the measly thing goes back on me, just like the old one used to. Huh! it's just sickening, that's what!"

"But you see, George," Josh remarked, with a wide grin, "the bally boat wouldn't feel right at all if it went too smooth. Ever since you first got her she's been accustomed to playing you tricks. Expect her to reform all at once, and be as meek as Moses? Well, I guess not. Give her time, George, plenty of time."

"Oh! she's got to see me through this cruise," declared the owner of the cranky speed boat; "because I haven't got the money to buy another right now. And no matter what the rest of you say, I've somehow always loved this boat."

"Of course," observed Herb; "they always

say that the bad child is loved most by its parents, because they feel the greatest anxiety for that one. But give me the steady old *Comfort,* that never keeps me awake guessing what sort of trick it'll play next."

"Oh! that's all right," remarked George, indifferently; "everybody to their taste. But I'd die in that tub, watching all the rest run circles around me."

"Oh! hardly that," laughed Herb; "because, you see, once in a while there's a little ripple of excitement comes breezing along, when some fellow asks to be taken in tow!"

Of course, after that George had nothing further to say; for he could look back to several instances that were full of humiliation to his proud spirit, when necessity had forced him to accept of this friendly aid on the part of his chums.

But they reached Pensacola finally in good shape. George hoped that after all, as the others said, that one little trick on the part of his engine might have only been a slip that would never occur again; though his confidence was shaken, and he watched its working suspiciously after that.

Letters from home greeted them at Pensacola; but no new developments were contained in them, at least nothing positive. The strike

had not been settled, and there was warm talk of the town putting men to work regardless of labor unions.

"And so little has been done," Jack remarked, after getting the consensus of opinions from all the letters that had been read, "that I can't see, for the life of me, how they're ever going to complete the building this season. I understand that it was proposed to use the biggest church in a pinch; but just as luck would have it, the heating plant in that has gone all to pieces, so that the scholars would be apt to freeze."

The boys looked at each other, and smiled. Perhaps they were, deep down in their hearts, secretly hoping that the workers up there would keep on quarreling, and the completion of the high school building be postponed until the next summer. For boys give little thought concerning lost opportunities in the way of learning. Besides, were they not getting the finest lessons possible in the line of self reliance; and was not this long cruise the best sort of education, when they had learned a thousand things that could never be forgotten?

When they left Pensacola the weather appeared favorable; but at this season of the year nothing can be taken for granted; so that

the experienced cruiser is accustomed to keeping a strict watch for signs of storms.

They had need of caution about this time, since there arose a necessity for considerable outside work, always dangerous in small boats, because of shallow water near the shore, and an absence of suitable harbors in which to seek shelter, should a sudden gale arise.

If all went well, they anticipated making it a one-night stop between Pensacola and Mobile; and Jack thought he had the place for this camp picked out on his coast chart, which he studied faithfully.

So, as this day moved along, they were putting the miles behind them at a steady rate. George had no new trouble with his engine, though it was noticed that he cut out some of his racing ahead of the others. Constant friction from water will wear away granite in time; and the numerous and long-continued troubles of George must be making an impression on his usually buoyant spirits.

"Alabama, here we rest!" sang out Jack, about five in the afternoon, as he pointed ahead to where a friendly island or key offered them the shelter they craved.

"Oh! I'm so glad!" Nick was heard to say, and they could easily guess why; for of course

Nick must be ravenously hungry—he nearly always was.

Accordingly they headed in, meaning to pass behind the end of the key that jutted out like a human finger, offering an asylum to all small craft that could gain the sheltered water behind.

It was just while they were slowing up, since caution had to be exercised whenever they neared shoal waters, that Herb called out excitedly:

"Oh! Jack, look out yonder; what in the dickens is that coming along, and sticking out of the water?"

Of course every eye was instantly turned in the direction Herb was pointing.

"It's a whale!" shouted Nick, almost falling overboard in his excitement, as he discovered some dreadful looking black object rushing through the water amid a sparkling mass of foam.

"A whale!" echoed Jimmy, dancing up and down excitedly; "Och! if I only had a harpoon now, wouldn't it be just grand? A whale would knock the spots out of the biggest shark that iver grew, so it would."

Jack had snatched up his marine glasses, and was leveling them at the monster, back of which trailed that line of foam and bub-

bles. The others, watching, saw him stare as though hardly able to believe his eyes, and then laugh outright.

"Oh! there goes Jimmy in the dinky; and, would you believe it, he's got a gun!" exclaimed Nick. "Nothing is too big to scare that boy, I do believe. He'd just as soon tackle a whale as a sunfish. Call him back, Jack, or he'll be drowned!"

Jack laid down the glasses, which had occupied his attention so much that he had not observed the actions of his cruising mate.

"Here, you, Jimmy, come right back!" he called, though he could hardly talk because of the desire to laugh.

"But howld on, Jack, darlint, didn't ye be afther sayin' anything that swum was a fish; and if I get a whale ain't it fair play?" the other replied, pausing in his labor of using the short oars belonging to the *Tramp's* tender.

"Sure, I did," answered Jack; "but that didn't mean you could go around banging away at one of your Uncle Sam's submarines, out for a trial spin from the Pensacola navy-yard. I guess you'd better come back now, before you get in trouble; don't you?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WINDING UP THE VOYAGE—CONCLUSION.

Ambitious Jimmy evidently came to the conclusion that a Government submarine was rather larger game than he cared to tackle. Besides, from the riotous way in which his five chums were laughing, he must have become convinced that there would be sustained objections to allowing him to count his prize, even did he bag such prey.

At any rate, he ceased rowing, and backed water, returning to the *Tramp,* with one of his characteristic wide grins decorating his freckled face. So the others never knew whether the wild Irish lad might have been playing a joke upon them, or really thought it was a whale, which he might as well try to take in.

The submarine had by this time vanished from sight, evidently testing her ability to remain under the surface of the water for a length of time; as well as proceeding at a rapid clip when partly submerged. But the boys did not see anything of the strange craft again.

They made their camp that night, just as

Jack had figured upon doing. And on the following day, by cleverly getting an early start, they passed around grim Fort Morgan, sailing up Mobile Bay, where gallant Farragut earned his lasting laurels many years ago.

But, besides securing their letters, if there were any, they did not mean to remain long here. One day sufficed to show them all they cared to see of the quaint little city that has had such a history.

Truth to tell, all the boys were anxious as to what news might await them when they reached New Orleans. That, of course, was to be the deciding point. If nothing new developed, it was of course their intention to hold to their original plan. This had been to ship the three motor boats up the Mississippi by some packet, themselves taking passage on a train, headed for home.

As they had previously made a voyage down the Father of Waters; and heading up against the fierce current was never to be thought of on the part of such small craft, this was really the only thing they could do.

Apparently they had plenty of time to reach their destination on schedule, and yet none knew better than did Jack Stormways how exasperating delays often occur to hold motor boats up. There was George, for instance,

with his unlucky speed boat, which might become disabled at a time when they would lose days towing him along; or it might be storms would follow each other so fast that a necessary outside passage could not be attempted.

And so they decided, that first night out from Mobile, that if there was any loafing to be done, they had better defer it until within a single day's run of the Crescent City. When their minds were perfectly free, and they knew nothing was apt to interfere with their carefully laid plans, that would be the time to hang around, and rest up.

So day succeeded day, and they drew gradually closer to their destination. Jimmy began to look very doleful, or at least pretended to be in the "dumps," as Josh called it. The wager would come to an end when they made the city on the lower Mississippi, no matter what their future course was to be. And if he had not beaten that wonderful shark record by then, the game was up.

Nick puffed himself out, and assumed airs. He felt that he had really done himself proud in bringing such a remarkable fish to land, alone and unaided. He even made out solemnly worded vouchers, which every one of the others was compelled to sign; and which

in so many sentences told the actual story of his feat.

"You see," Nick explained, "a lot of people up in our town would call it just a fish story, and let it go at that. And I want to prove it to my dad as well. He never dreams what a wonderful boy he's got. Guess they won't laugh so much after this, because I happen to have a little extra flesh on my bones. That don't mean I'm lacking in muscle, does it? I think not. Haven't we got a shining example of the same in our great and noble President today? Huh! a fellow can be stout, and yet some punkins, after all."

"And that little kodak picture I took will go a good way toward proving your story, Nick," remarked Josh "When they see you standing so nobly, with one foot on that *tre*-menjous shark, it'd have to be a mighty suspicious feller that would doubt your word. And even Jimmy, here, your worsted competitor, has signed your affidavy."

"Sure if I'm worsted, I'm wool, and a yarrd wide!" grinned the said Jimmy.

"By the way, I notice that Jimmy doesn't get busy any longer with that shark line," remarked Herb, turning to the Irish lad with a questioning look.

"Then he must have given it up as a bad job," said George.

"How about that, Jimmy; are you ready to crown Nick as the king pin of the bunch when it comes to bagging big fish? Shall we get the laurel wreath, and put it on his brow? Will you admit that you're cleanly beaten at the game?"

Jack put the question direct, for he privately knew that Jimmy had yielded the palm. The other jumped up, snatched his banjo from the ground, and began to strum something that set the boys in a roar, and made Nick blush with pleasure. For the tune was, "Lo, the Conquering Hero Comes."

"How long have we been in making this splendid run from Philadelphia?" Herb asked a little later, as Jack was jotting down some notes of the day's run in his logbook.

"Nearly three months, all told, counting our numerous stops," was the reply; "or it will be that when we get to New Orleans. December is nearly over now; Christmas has gone by, and the New Year only a few days away."

"Well, I haven't kept exact track, to tell the truth," Herb went on; "but I guessed it must be about that. Do you want to know how? Why, you remember that on our very first night out, the moon was just four days old?"

"That's a fact," spoke up George; "for I can recollect noticing it up in the western heavens, and wishing it would hurry along, so as to give us more light nights."

"Well, this is about the dark of the moon now," added Herb, triumphantly.

"No use for Herb to ever own a watch again," laughed Josh. "He just prides himself on being able to tell the time of day by the sun; and now he's shown us how he can find out what day of the month it is by the moon. Pretty soon he'll be using the stars to tell his age, and when he cut his first tooth. Once you start in along that line, there's just no limit to what you can do, I reckon, eh, Herb?"

"Well, all I can say, fellows," quoth Jack, as he slapped his logbook shut, and glanced around at the sunburned and healthy looking faces of his five good camp-mates, "is that we've surely had the time of our lives on this dandy voyage; and no matter what happens next, we're never going to forget the glorious runs our little fleet of motor boats have made outside, and in, along the whole coast, from the frozen North to the Sunny South!"

"Hear! hear!" shouted Josh, enthusiastically waving his hat above his head.

"You never spoke truer words, Jack," re-

marked George, with deep feeling. "It's sure been the happiest time of my whole life; or would have been," he hastily added, while a slight frown broke over his face, "only for the trouble that blessed old motor gave me every little while."

"But you're all right now, George, with the new engine aboard," condoled Nick.

"Perhaps I am," replied the skeptical George; "but the proof of the pudding is in the eating of it. The new machine may go back on me yet."

"But, my goodness! you've had it, going on three weeks, and in all that time she only shied once! What better do you want than that?" demanded Herb.

"Oh! well, you never can tell," replied the skipper of the *Wireless*.

"Fact is, fellers," Nick declared, "George has become so used to looking for sudden trouble to spring on him, that he can't think of anything else. He's all the time watching for a breakdown to happen."

"Three weeks ought to satisfy him that his new engine is all to the good," remarked Josh, "but seems like it don't. Say, George makes me think of that Irishman who was always looking for trouble. He had been employed by the same railroad company forty-three

years; but, getting too old for the work, he was let go. When some of his friends, seeing him look so doleful, took him to task, he shook his head and said, says he: 'It's not surprised at all I am; for ever since I began work here I've known it wouldn't be a permanent job!' "

And so they laughed and joked as the time slipped away.

Of course they did not intend passing around to the delta of the mighty Mississippi, when there was a much more convenient way of reaching the Crescent City by passing through the straits called the Rigolets, and thus entering Lake Ponchartrain; from whence, by means of the canal, the city could be gained.

It was on New Year's day, at about three in the afternoon, with a piping cold wind streaming down from the frozen North, that the little motor boat flotilla came to a last stop in a quiet boatyard near the great city on the river, which had seen the windup of a previous voyage of the club.

And, anxious as they were to hear from home, the six chums did not neglect to shake hands all around over the remarkably successful termination of their long and adventurous trip down the Eastern coast, and among the keys of Florida.

If the news they received was what they expected it would be, they intended to load the three boats on the first packet bound up the river, and then wend their way home by train.

Whether this plan was fated to be carried out or not, must be left to another book. Having attained the goal for which they had striven so splendidly; and with the bitter rivalry between Jimmy and Nick settled for all time, we can safely leave our young friends at this point, wishing them all good luck in other voyages which they may undertake in the near future.

THE END.

THERMOMETERS AND BAROMETERS

In a single day the Department received a thousand complaints from postmasters in all parts of the country, calling attention to "the greatest swindle of the age," which was being worked through the mails from Indianapolis. On the following day two thousand similar complaints were received, while on the third day as many came as had been received on both of the other days.

Somebody awoke that day to the fact that there must be a screw loose in the machinery at Indianapolis, and I was wired to go forthwith and see if I could not discover what was wrong, and, if possible, apply the remedy.

Soon after my arrival I ascertained that the trouble had been caused by a little circular sent to every postmaster in the United States and Canada by a firm known as I. C. Gordon & Co., who had lately opened a place of business in the Thorp Block. These circulars had been so ingeniously drawn that about 34,000 postmasters had failed to discover the trap set for them, and had rushed in blindly, drawing in several thousand of their friends also. When it dawned upon them that they had been misled, they sought to

get even with Gordon & Co., by reporting them; hence so many complaints.

The circular contained a beautiful cut of an elaborate signal service combination thermometer and barometer, which Gordon & Co. were manufacturing at their new and extensive works in Indianapolis. Then followed a sketch of the distinguished philanthropist who invented and gave to the world, through Gordon & Co., the wonderful combination thermometer and barometer, the accuracy and delicacy of which were absolutely perfect.

Then the various uses to which these particular instruments could be used were graphically portrayed; and to any merchant, mechanic, professional man, or farmer, it was guaranteed that if the price of the instrument was not saved by its use in a short time their money would be refunded. Owing to a serious break in the quicksilver market, these instruments could now be furnished by Gordon & Co. for $2.50; whereas before the break in quicksilver, the price of the signal service combination had never dropped lower than $4.25.

Now was the time to take advantage of cheap prices. Gordon & Co. desired agents in every town and hamlet in the world. They requested each postmaster to send them the names of two or three reliable men in their section, who would be willing to handle the best selling article on earth, at which they could easily earn from $10 to $20 per day.

The price of a sample instrument to any person, whose name the postmaster might furnish, would be placed at the remarkably low figure of $1. a mere

nominal sum. For the generous services of the postmaster one instrument, embracing the entire combination, would be forwarded free of cost—on receipt of thirty-seven cents to pay for boxing and packing.

When at first a hundred letters or so a day would be received at the post-office for Gordon & Co. nothing wrong was suspected, but when the number rose in one day to two thousand it was discovered that Jim Wildman, the postmaster, had been appropriately named. He flew frantically to the house of Gordon & Co. to ascertain if the business was straight.

He met Mr. Gordon for the first time on this occasion, who took great pleasure in showing him through the establishment and introducing him to the large number of employés, who were all busy opening letters, counting stamps and money and packing the instruments for shipment.

Mr. Gordon also called the postmaster's attention to a large number of cases packed around the outer walls of the rooms. Suspended from the side of each of the cases, as you have seen shoes hanging out of shoe boxes in stores, was one of the signal service barometers and thermometers combined, indicating that each case was filled with them. This had a business look and greatly pleased Mr. Wildman, who was a business man.

Mr. Gordon related to the postmaster the various interesting circumstances that combined to bring him from Pittsburg, where he left a good business, to embark with Mr. Arthur Block, his partner, in this business, which, he was very happy to say, was turn-

ing out to be much more lucrative than either Mr. Block or himself had anticipated.

Up to this time there had been a lingering doubt in Mr. Wildman's mind about the genuineness of the business, but the mere mention of Mr. Block's name dispelled it all. If Block was a partner no further inquiries were necessary, and the postmaster quietly withdrew, after having apologized to Gordon for having bothered him when he was so busy.

Mr. Arthur Block was a gentleman who needed no introduction to the business people of Indianapolis. He was the business manager for one of the largest printing establishments in the city; prominent in the secret societies, and treasurer of one or two. His family and their associates were regarded as among the most respectable people in the State.

The reputation and character of Mr. Block was spotless, and it is evident that almost any person who knew him would have reached the same conclusion the postmaster did the instant he was told that Block was a partner in the thermometer and barometer business. So much for a good reputation.

The business of Gordon & Co. progressed vigorously and uninterruptedly from that time forward till the complaints from thousands of postmasters, who had forwarded 37 cents and had received nothing, had become alarmingly conspicuous. The enterprising firm withstood the storm of indignant letters and postal cards just as long as they thought the genial atmosphere of the Indiana capital would be beneficial to their happiness, and than they suddenly, and without warning to their employes and creditors, decided to

take a rest. They rested sometime during the night before my arrival.

The morning I came, one of the creditors had made the startling discovery that the large cases, supposed to be filled with thermometers and barometers, really were filled with air, which at that time was not worth much; and over Gordon's desk was pinned a little note, informing those interested, that Mr. Gordon had suddenly been called away east, and that his stay might be indefinite.

Soon afterward it was also learned that the truly good man, Mr. Block, had not appeared at his business that day, and neither had any excuse for his absence been received; and still later, when he could not be found, it was discovered that the accounts of the Printing Company would not balance into a thousand or two, and that the funds belonging to the various lodges and trusts had also disappeared.

Indianapolis was so badly shaken up by these revelations, that the town clock stopped. The people had not known much about Gordon, but they had expected better things of Block. The only thing that astonished me particularly, was the fact that, with the price of glass, tin, and quicksilver at the maximum, a whole wagon-load of the simple barometers and thermometers could be bought for two dollars and a half.

But it was a clever scheme, and Gordon & Co. had gone with a handsome sum of money. So extensive a swindle could not be easily condoned, and we must bring the men back. Inspector Ray was assigned to assist me.

In looking up Gordon we ascertained that his real name was Benjamin Franklin Gardner, and that he possessed a few talents that were decidedly original. He had lived in the oil country in Western Pennsylvania, where he was well known. We had Block located in a short time in Philadelphia, where he had engaged as a traveling salesman; but we did not care to molest him till Gardner was in hand, fearing that if one was arrested and not the other, we would never get the other.

Not long afterward we heard of Gardner in Florida, where, under the name of Heuling, he was booming a new town. Ray was to go after Gardner, and I was to bring in Block. By an arrangement, neither of us was to disturb our man till each was ready, so that the arrests might be made simultaneously, thus guarding against accidents. The plan was carried out to the letter, and, on the day that Block was "rung-up" in Youngstown, Ohio, Gardner, alias Heuling, was surprised in the land of flowers. Both were returned to Indianapolis, where Block's friends went his bail for appearance at court. Gardner, having no influential friends, was compelled to remain in jail, awaiting the trial. The case was finally called before Judge Blodgett, of Chicago, who was chosen in place of the regular judge, who did not desire to preside.

Both prisoners were easily convicted, but for some reason, unknown to the writer, the court set the verdict of the jury aside, so far as it pertained to Block, and, as a sort of compromise to Gardner, he was sentenced to one year at hard labor in the

Hendricks county jail, and given credit for the time he had already spent in the Indianapolis jail.

At the Hendricks county jail, Gardner made himself generally useful, teaching the sheriff's children, till one afternoon when he went with them to a neighboring wildwood to instruct them somewhat in the works of nature, he forgot to return. I believe, however, he did return in a few weeks, bringing with him one of the signal service thermometers and barometers, which he presented to the sheriff, for which kindness the sheriff generously allowed him to remain till his time was up.

While enjoying the hospitalities of the sheriff the last time he decided to drop quicksilver, and put some of his knowledge of oil to practical use; so he wrote a play, in which there were four characters; a legitimate broker, an assumed oil man, a smart young man who could keep his mouth shut, and a newspaper reporter. He determined to carry out his play in reality, and his first move was to secure employment on a Chicago newspaper. Then he contrived to secure an assignment wherein a visit to a well-known Chicago firm of brokers was necessary, cultivated their acquaintance, kept posted on oil, and when the shut-down movement began in Pennsylvania gave the firm a "tip," which proved to be the right one. Gardner also made friends in all the other newspaper offices. Finally he made the startling assertion to the brokers that he could break the oil market to any figure he wanted. They were interested, and Gardner pulled out his little [illegible]

and read it from the manuscript. It was decided to push the scheme; Gardner and the broker to play two of the parts, while Richard Galvin and Alexander Reno were secured for the others. Galvin is an actor, and Gardner engaged him at a dramatic agency. Galvin was to play the assumed oil man. His work was to be done in one night and $40 and expenses were to be the reward. Reno was to play the smart young man, and the four came together and actually rehearsed their parts. It was decided to locate the imaginary well on the farm of E. S. Harris, eighteen miles from Carmi, Ill. Reno was sent to that point.

The same night the actor registered at the Briggs House, in Chicago, as Morris McLaughlin, of Bradley, McLaughlin & Co. Gardner, in the meantime, sauntered along the street, and encountering a newspaper man, invited him into a saloon; the broker, per instructions followed, suddenly interrupting the conversation with a sneering reflection at Chicago natural gas discoveries, and intimating that it was no sensation at all compared with the discovery of oil in Illinois. Gardner feigned ridicule, and the broker insisted that the man who owned the well was at the Briggs House.

Naturally the reporter made a bee line for the hotel, talked with McLaughlin, and by him was shown a pan of genuine petroleum which had been procured from Pennsylvania. Gardner, in the meantime, watched for other reporters, and with the aid of his broker accomplice soon had them looking for

McLaughlin, who, as part of the plot, exhibited a telegram from Reno at Carmi. It read as follows:

"Well continues to flow at intervals of twenty minutes. Powers estimates the output at eighty barrels an hour. Gas strong and can be heard miles away. Will look for tanks *via* Short Line."

Later in the night a newspaper wired Carmi to investigate the report, and the lone and innocent operator used the only information at hand. He duplicated Reno's message in substance. The next morning the oil market in the East broke and the Chicago broker cleared $20,000. Gardner does not know whether that was all his profit, but at any rate a division was made on that basis, which he says was almost as good as the thermometer and barometer business.

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